

1. DON BOSCO'S 'THEOLOGY' OF RELIGIOUS LIFE

*As an introduction to the first Italian edition of the Salesian Constitutions, published in 1875, Don Bosco wrote a wide-ranging letter To the Salesians, to guide them in interpreting the rules and to infuse in them a correct idea of religious life. He later refined and extended it with the help of the master of novices, Fr Barberis, for the third Italian edition of the Constitutions (1885). It is a relevant document from a spiritual point of view. "One can think of it as a brief summary, the most complete one, of what could be called Don Bosco's theology of religious life. Ideas flow together in it which had matured in him little by little, beginning from when he wrote the history of the Church and the Popes, then as he drew up the Constitutions and documents written to gain approval, further enriched by local and general conferences, instructions given at retreats in the late 1860s and early 1870s, and expressed in individual letters and circulars and in private advice."*³³

We find classic themes there of consecrated life drawn from the spiritual works of St Alphonsus, but reformulated in the light of personal experience: the importance of corresponding generously to God's will, ways of guarding our vocation, the spiritual and temporal advantages of religious life, the significance of the vows and their practice, fraternal charity as a particular element of Salesian community, how to overcome our doubts about our vocation, faults to be avoided.

*What emerges from this document are the efforts of the Founder to give his budding Salesian Society a more defined religious character, a "compact structure ad intra and ad extra, guaranteed in stability and continuity by pontifical authority and solidly gathered around the general and local superior."*³⁴

The second edition of this item—the one found here—indicates a broadening of themes and vision. Religious life is solidly anchored in its evangelical roots. Three new paragraphs are included: on the importance of following one's vocation, on fraternal charity and on the monthly manifestation to the superior of the House.

³³ P. BRAIDO, *Don Bosco prete dei giovani...*, II, p. 277.

³⁴ Pietro BRAIDO, *Tratti di vita religiosa salesiana nello scritto "Ai Soci Salesiani" di don Bosco del 1875*, in RSS 13 (1994) 393-394.

Also emerging is his concern to shape a kind of consecration which is intimately connected with the specific mission and charism. We find above all a strong emphasis on obedience ordered to apostolic work and Salesian education which, according to Don Bosco, demands unity of direction and complete cooperative consensus on everyone's part. From this perspective we also understand his insistence on the monthly manifestation, aimed at reinforcing solidarity and confident familiarity between superior and subjects in an atmosphere of fraternal charity and the tendency to perfection.

224. To the Salesians

Critical ed. in RSS 14 (1995) 112-154.

Our Constitutions, my dearly beloved sons in Jesus Christ, were definitively approved by the Holy See on April 3, 1874.

We should welcome this fact as being amongst the most glorious in the annals of our Society, since through it we have the assurance that by observing our rules we rest upon a firm, secure and, I may add, infallible basis since the judgement of the Supreme Head of the Church who sanctions them is itself infallible.

But whatever its inherent value may be, this approval would be of little avail if the rules were not known and faithfully observed. It is precisely so that they may be easily known, read, meditated upon and put into practice by everyone that I consider it good to present them to you as a translation from the original text. The Latin text was printed separately. Here you have the rules common to all Salesian confreres.

I believe it would be useful to bring some practical matters to your notice which will make it easier to understand the spirit informing the rules and which will help you observe them carefully and devotedly. It is from my heart that I speak, whilst briefly placing before you what experience leads me to judge to be conducive to your spiritual good and the benefit of the whole Society.

Entrance into religion

The enemy of the human race exercises his malignant power against man in three ways: by pleasures or earthly satisfaction, by temporal goods, especially riches and the abuse of freedom. "For all that is in the world," says the Apostle St John, "is the concupiscence of the flesh, and concupiscence of the eyes and the pride of life." How are we to free ourselves from these pernicious chains by which the devil unceasingly tries to bind us and drag us into perdition? Only religion can provide the arms with which to combat these three formidable foes. If a Christian who desires to place his soul in safety, embraces the religious state, he breaks these chains to pieces with a single blow and puts his enemies to flight. By the vow of chastity he renounces every satisfaction of sense; by the vow of poverty he frees himself from the grievous anxieties inseparable from temporal things; by the vow of obedience he puts a bridle on his own will and is thus beyond the risk of abusing it.

For this reason those who leave the world to enter a religious Congregation are compared to those who were saved by Noah's Ark at the time of the Flood. In the midst of the world we are as though on a stormy sea where iniquity and malice are everywhere borne in triumph. "*The whole world,*" writes the aforementioned Apostle, "*is seated in wickedness.*" The religious is similar to one who goes on board ship, and trusting himself entirely to the care of a skilful captain, reposes tranquilly even in the midst of storms. The religious is in a fortress guarded by Our Lord.

"*When a strong man armed,*" says our Divine Saviour, "*keeps his court, those things are in peace which he possesses.*"

Such great peace and tranquillity are enjoyed in this mystical fortress, that if God were to make them known and experienced by those who live in the world, we should see them all fleeing away from it and taking the cloister by storm in order to enter and abide there the rest of their earthly days. St Laurence Giustiniani writes, "God has providentially concealed the grace of the religious state, since if its happiness were generally known, everyone would forsake the world and run to embrace it."

Importance of following a vocation (35)

Almighty God who is most merciful and infinitely rich in graces, at the time when he created man, appointed a path for him by which, if he pursues it, he can easily secure his eternal salvation. The man who enters on that path and walks along it has little difficulty in fulfilling God's will, and abides in peace; whereas if he were not to enter on that way he would then run the great risk of not having afterwards the graces necessary for salvation. For this reason Father Granata called the choosing of the state of life the mainspring of one's whole career. And as in a watch, if the balance wheel is out of gear, the whole mechanism is out of gear too, so in regard to our salvation, if a wrong state is chosen the whole life will be wrong, as St Gregory Nazianzen says; and if we wish to secure our eternal salvation we must endeavour to follow the divine vocation in which God will furnish us with special aid to gain eternal life. Because, as St Paul writes, *"Everyone has his proper gift from God."* In other words, as St Cornelius A Lapide explains, God gives to each his vocation and chooses for him that state in which it is His will to save him. This is precisely the order or the predestination described by the Apostle in these words: *"Those whom he predestined, them also he called; and whom he called, them also he justified ... and glorified."*

It must, however, be observed that the question of vocation is a matter little understood by the world.

To men of the world it seems the same thing to live in the state to which one is called by God as it is to live in the state chosen by one's inclination. And thus so many lead bad lives and fall into damnation. But it is certain that on this all important point depends our eternal salvation.

To vocation there follows justification and glorification. "If you do not follow out your vocation," says St Augustine, "you run well but out of the way: out of the way, that is, in which God has called you to the end that he may save you. God also threatens with great chastisements those who turn a deaf

³⁵ This chapter and the one that follows express the sentiments of St Alphonsus Maria de' Liguori, Doctor of the Church (note in the original text).

ear to his calls and follow the counsel of their own inclinations instead; saying by the Prophet Isaiah: *‘Woe to you apostate children.’*”

The divine calls to a more perfect life are indeed special graces, and very great ones, which God does not vouchsafe to all. He has good reason, therefore, to be indignant with those who treat them with disdain.

How deeply offended an earthly prince feels if he calls a subject to his palace to serve him in a position nearer to himself and the subject does not obey! And will not God also resent the like? The chastisement of the disobedient will commence even in this life by the disquietude he will always feel therein. On this account Habert the theologian says: “Not without great difficulty will such a one be able to provide for his eternal salvation.” It will be very difficult for such a person to secure his salvation if he remains in the world.

A remarkable vision was seen by a certain novice to whom (Pinamonti writes in his treatise on *The Victorious Vocation*), whilst thinking of leaving religious life, Jesus Christ appeared on his throne, full of indignation, commanding his name to be blotted out of the Book of life. Whereupon, overcome with terror, he persevered in his vocation. Our Lord says: *“Because I called you and you refused, I will also laugh in your destruction, and will mock at you in your perdition”*, words the meaning of which is that God will not hearken to the voice of those by whom his voice has been despised.

Consequently when God calls anyone to a more perfect state of life, he ought to obey, and obey immediately, if he would not greatly endanger his salvation. Otherwise the same might befall him as befell the young man in the Gospel, who when invited by Our Lord to follow him, asked that he might go first and bid farewell to his relatives; but Jesus replied that *he was not fit for the kingdom of God* uttering these solemn words: *“No man putting his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.”*

Promptitude in following a vocation

The religious state is one that is sublime and truly angelic. Those who, for the sake of God and of their eternal salvation, feel their heart moved by the desire to embrace this state of perfection and holiness, may without doubt

conclude that this desire comes from heaven, since it is too generous and too elevated to spring from the sentiments of nature.

And let them not fear that they will lack the strength to fulfil the obligations which the religious state imposes. Rather let them have great confidence since God, who has begun the good work, will bring it to a successful issue and entire fulfilment, according to the words of St Paul: *“He who has begun a good work in you, will perfect it unto the day of Jesus Christ.”*

It is also to be observed, says the angelic doctor St Thomas, that the divine vocation to a more perfect life ought to be followed promptly: *“Quanto citius.”* In his *Summa Theologica* he proposes the question whether it is a commendable thing to enter religion without consulting many advisers and without long deliberation. And he replies in the affirmative, saying that counsel and consideration are necessary in those things whose goodness is doubtful, but not in this which is certainly good, since Our Lord himself has counselled it in the Gospel. How strange it is that when it is a question of entering religion in order to lead a life of greater perfection and of greater security from the dangers of the world, men of the world say that for such a resolution there is need of long deliberation in order to make certain that the vocation really comes from God and is not a temptation of the devil. They do not speak thus, however, when it is a question of accepting some honourable office in the world where there are so many risks of perdition. On the other hand, St Thomas says that even though the religious vocation were to come from the devil it ought to be followed, just as a good counsel ought to be taken even though it has come from an enemy.

St John Chrysostom asserts that when God has given such calls, he does not want us to hesitate even for a moment, to follow them.

Elsewhere the same saint says that when the devil is unable to dissuade a person from resolving to consecrate himself to God, he seeks at least to get him to defer the execution of his resolve and if he obtains that postponement for a single day, an hour, he esteems it a great gain, because after that day or hour, when another occasion comes, he will then find it easier to obtain a further extension of time, until at last the youth who has received the call,

becoming weaker and less assisted by grace, yields altogether and abandons his vocation.

Hence it is that St Jerome gives this advice to one who is called to leave the world: “Hasten, I beseech you, and cut asunder rather than untie the rope that holds your barque fast to the shore.” The saint means by this that just as one who finds himself in a boat fast anchored and in danger of being sunk would endeavour to cut the rope rather than untie it, so he who finds himself in the midst of the world should endeavour to free himself from it as soon as possible and thus with all speed deliver himself from the risk of perdition into which it is very easy to fall.

And now let us hear what our own St Francis de Sales says about religious vocations. “To have a sign of a good vocation, there is no need of a constancy that is sensibly felt, as long as it remains in the superior part of the soul. Therefore the vocation ought not to be considered as not true if, before carrying it out, the person who has received it no longer experiences those emotional sentiments which he had before; nor even though he feels repugnance and coldness towards it, which may cause him at times to vacillate and think that all is lost. It is enough that the will remains constant in not abandoning the divine call, provided that there also remains a certain amount of affection towards it. To know whether it is God’s will that anyone should be a religious, there is no need to wait for God himself to speak to him, or to send an Angel from heaven to signify his will. Nor is there any need for an investigation by ten learned divines to see whether the vocation ought to be followed or not. But it is necessary to correspond and cultivate the first motion of the inspiration, and not to be discouraged if distaste or tepidity arises. Because if this be done, God will not fail to make all redound to his own glory.”

*Ways of safeguarding our vocation*³⁶

The vocation to the religious state can be thought of as the precious pearl the Gospel speaks of which we should safeguard jealously and diligently. Saint

³⁶ This chapter is drawn from Alphonsus Maria DE’ LIGUORI, *Opuscoli relativi allo stato religioso, in Opere ascetiche di S. Alfonso Maria de’ Liguori*. Vol. 4. Torino, Giacinto Marietti 1847, pp. 400-404 (opuscolo I, § 2).

Alphonsus suggests three practices in order not to lose it. They are: *Secrecy, prayer and recollection*. Here is what St Alphonsus says: “Firstly, speaking universally, you need to keep your vocation a secret from everyone except your spiritual director, since ordinarily, others have no scruples in telling poor young people called to the religious state that they can serve God anywhere, even in the world. Yes, someone not called to religion can serve God anywhere, but not someone who has already been called and wants to remain in the world; it will be difficult for him to lead a good life and serve God.

“Then especially, we need to hide our vocation from friends and relatives. This was already Luther’s view, as Bellarmine tells us, that the children sinned by entering religion without their parents’ consent because, he said, children are obliged to obey them in everything. But this view has commonly been rebutted by the Councils and the Fathers. The 10th Council of Toledo, in its last chapter, said expressly that it was licit for children to become religious without their parents’ consent, so long as they were older than 14. The same is said in the Tiburtine Council, chapter 24. It is also the teaching of St Ambrose, St Jerome, St Augustine, St Bernard, St Thomas and others, like St John Chrysostom, who wrote in general terms: *When parents get in the way of spiritual matters, they should not even be recognised as parents any more.*

“Father Pinamonti wisely adds that parents have no experience in these matters, and to the contrary often have some temporal interests for advising otherwise and therefore become enemies. Saint Thomas, speaking of religious vocations, says: *“Where vocation is concerned parents are not friends but enemies, according to what the Lord says: Man’s enemies are those of his own household”*. And soon the Fathers agreed that children are damned with them but saved away from them. Then Saint Bernard exclaims: *Oh inhuman father! Oh cruel mother! They prefer to see you perish with them, than reign without them.* Saint Cyril, explaining Jesus Christ’s comment to the young man in the Gospel: *No one who puts his hand to the plough and looks back, is fit for the Kingdom of God*, comments that whoever looks for time to confer with relatives about his vocation is precisely the kind that the Lord declares unfit for the Kingdom: *The one who delays and goes to discuss things with his parents is looking back.*

We have seen many saints leave home without their parents' consent. Thomas Aquinas, St Francis Xavier, St Philip Neri, St Louis Bertrand, St Clare, St Teresa and many others did so.

And we know that the Lord has even approved such glorious flight with miracles. St Peter of Alcantara, while going to the monastery to become a religious, fleeing from his mother at home, since he was under her care after his father's death, found himself blocked by a huge river; he recommended himself to God in that predicament and was immediately transported to the other bank. St Stanislaus Kostka too had fled from home to become a religious without his father's consent. His brother went after him at full speed in a carriage. But just as he was about to catch up with him, the horses, no matter how much they were whipped, would not take another step forward, turned back and ran back to the city unbridled.

Secondly you need to be of the view that these vocations are only preserved through prayer. The one who puts prayer aside will certainly leave his vocation. It takes prayer, much prayer; therefore do not omit at least half an hour of prayer morning and evening. Do not omit the visit to the Blessed Sacrament and Mary most holy each day, in order to obtain perseverance in your vocation. The religious should not omit going to Communion a number of times during the week. He will meditate often on his vocation, considering how great is the grace that God has given him by calling him to himself. The more he ensures that his eternal salvation is guaranteed, the more he will be faithful to God in following his vocation. And to the contrary, what danger he will expose himself to if he is unfaithful!

Thirdly, there is need for recollection, and this cannot be achieved without drawing aside from conversations and secular amusements. What does it take to lose one's vocation in the world? Nothing much. An entire day doing little, a comment from a friend, an unbridled passion, attachment to something, a fear, a regret not put behind one—any of these are enough. Anyone who does not abandon his pastimes needs to be persuaded that he will doubtless lose his vocation. He will suffer remorse at not following it but he will certainly not follow it. How many have lost their vocation, and their souls, for lack of attention to this fact.” (St Alphonsus, Doctor of the Church).

Temporal advantages

One who enters religion should do so guided solely by the thought of making his eternal salvation secure, but still he may rest tranquil that in this blessed fortress God will provide whatever is needed for his temporal life. In religious societies each individual is a member of one great family which has for its head Jesus Christ, represented in the person of the Superior. "Take no thought," he tells us, "for what you need for your meat, your drink or your clothing. Be solicitous only for the kingdom of heaven and for the works that lead thereto and leave the care of all other things to your heavenly Father." "*Seek first,*"—these are his divine words—"*the kingdom of God and his justice and all things else shall be added unto you.*" And indeed, in our own Congregation which has no possessions whatever, have any of the necessities of life been found wanting? With the assistance of this loving Divine Providence we have been able to build both churches and houses, to furnish them and provide for the pupils in them. Of these many have completed a course of study, and others learned some art or trade and all this without having lacked anything in the way of lodging, food or clothing, either in sickness or in health. We have, moreover, begun our missions in America, whither we have sent several expeditions of evangelical labourers and we are even now preparing to send others.

Not only our own but all religious institutes and congregations and above all the mendicant orders, have always experienced the same loving treatment at the hands of Divine Providence.

It is the saying of a saint that a religious abandons one home and acquires a hundred; that he leaves one brother and gains a thousand.

In the case of sickness we have places for a change of air, whether lowland, upland or the seaside, according to what is most suitable—opportunities we would never have had if we had remained in the world, not even among our nearest relatives.

Spiritual advantages

We do not, however, want to give ourselves to God's service for the miserable things of this earth. We are going in search of spiritual goods, goods never liable to be stolen from us or snatched away. We desire goods that may be useful for the life to come and that may put us one day in possession of the joys of heaven.

Saint Bernard (*De bono religionis*) gives us a brief but clear idea of the advantages of religious life in these words: "*Homo vivit purius, cadit rarius, surgit velocius, incedit cautius, irroratur frequentius, quiescit securius, moritur confidentius, purgatur citius, remuneratur copiosius.*" Here is a succinct explanation of it.

Vivit purius; he lives more purely. The one who consecrates himself to God in religion frees himself from all the snares and allurements of the world and so lives with greater purity of heart, will and work. Consequently all that he does and every word he speaks are spontaneously offered up to God with purity of body and cleanliness of heart: *Casto corpore et mundo corde*. And this, if we would not call it impossible, is certainly very difficult for one who lives in the world.

Cadit rarius; he falls more rarely. Religious profession does not make anyone impeccable, but it does supply means for him to practise which either prevent him from falling or on the strength of which he will fall more rarely and generally in things of slight importance, in failings or venial faults into which the just fall several times a day.

Surgit velocius; he rises up more quickly. If anyone who lives in the world has the misfortune to fall into some evil, he is all alone, and has no one to aid him; indeed he is generally ridiculed and reviled if he endeavours to rise up again. Hence the Holy Spirit says: "*Woe unto him who is alone, for when he falls he has no one to lift him up.*" Whereas in religion, if anyone has the misfortune to fall, he has immediate help at hand. The rules, practices of piety, the example of his brethren, the persuasion and counsel of his superiors, everything contributes to assist him to rise up again: "*If one falls, another*

sustains him.” He is assisted by his brethren to rise up again, says St Thomas.

Incedit cautius; he walks more circumspectly. He lives in a fortress watched over by the Lord. A thousand means are at hand to help him, protect him and enable him to be victorious in his temptations.

Irroratur frequentius; upon him the dew of heavenly grace falls more often. He has renounced the world and all its vanities. By observing the religious vows, occupied solely in what is for the greater glory of God, he constantly deserves divine blessings and special graces.

Quiescit securius; he sleeps more securely. Whoever lives in the world, willingly or otherwise, must often experience the disquiet and bitterness which life is full of. But he who lives apart from temporal worries can freely busy himself with serving the Lord, entrusting every thought of the present and the future into God’s hands and the hands of his superiors who take God’s place. If he faithfully observes the holy rule he can enjoy heaven in advance.

Moritur confidentius; he dies with greater confidence of his eternal salvation. People in the world are afraid at the point of death for what they have enjoyed that they now must leave behind and for which they must render account at the judgement seat of the Lord. But whoever has abandoned everything to give himself to God, whoever renounces all earthly enjoyments in the hope of a heavenly reward, no longer loves any earthly thing, therefore awaits nothing else but to leave this vale of tears to fly to the Creator’s bosom. Moreover a good conscience, the sacraments and other religious comforts received, the assistance and prayers of his brethren, allow him to see death as the end of his labours which open the gates of heaven for him.

Purgatur citius; his time in purgatory is shortened. Indulgences gained, the merit from the sacraments, the suffrages of the Congregation both at death and after death, assure him that he will have little or no Purgatory to endure. “Blessed are they who, dead to the world, die in the Lord” says the Holy Spirit. Because, as St Bernard observes, “such people fly with ease from their cells to heaven.”

Remuneratur copiosius; has a more plentiful reward in heaven. Whoever gives a glass of fresh water for the sake of his heavenly Father, will have his reward. So he who forsakes the world, renounces all earthly satisfaction and gives life and substance to follow his divine master, what reward will he not have in heaven? Moreover the penances he has done, his prayers, the sacraments received, the souls saved through good example and by his efforts, the many suffrages which will continue to be made in the Congregation, will undoubtedly place him on a majestic throne of glory, where in God's sight, like a bright sun, he will shine forever.

The vows

The first time the Supreme Pontiff, Pius IX, spoke of the Salesian Society, he said: "vows are necessary in a religious congregation or society, so that all its members may be united by a tie of conscience to their Superior, and the superior keeps himself and his subjects united with the Head of the Church and as a consequence, with God himself."

Our vows therefore may be called so many spiritual cords by which we consecrate ourselves to the Lord and place our will, our goods, our physical and moral faculties in the power of the Superior, so that we may all form but one heart and soul in order to promote the greater glory of God, according to our Constitutions, precisely as the Church invites us when in her prayers she says: *That the faith in their minds and the piety of their actions may be one.*

The vows are a generous offering by which the merit of our works is greatly increased. St Anselm teaches that a good work without vow is like the fruit of a tree. He who does it by vow offers up the fruit and the tree itself. St Bonaventure likens the work done without vow to the offering up of interest without capital. With a vow both interest and capital are offered to God. Furthermore the holy Fathers of the Church unanimously teach that every act performed by vow has a twofold merit, that of the good work itself, and that of carrying out the vow which has been made.

Furthermore, the act of pronouncing religious vows, according to St Thomas, restores our baptismal innocence, that is, it puts us in the state as if we

had just received baptism. The Doctors of the Church were also accustomed to comparing religious vows to martyrdom, saying that the merit of the one who professes vows is that of one who receives martyrdom; because what the vows fall short of in intensity is made up for in duration.

If the religious vows so greatly increase the merit of our works and make them acceptable to God, then we ought earnestly strive to fulfil them.

He who feels he is not able to keep them should not make them, or should at least defer professing them until he feels in his heart that he is firmly resolved to keep them. Otherwise he makes a faithless and foolish promise to God, which cannot but displease him: "*For,*" says the Holy Spirit "*the foolish and unfaithful promise is displeasing to God.*" Let us therefore prepare ourselves well for this heroic consecration; once we have made it, let us endeavour to keep it even at the cost of long and burdensome sacrifice: "*pay your vows to the Most High*" is what he himself commands.

Obedience

"The perfection of every virtue lies in true obedience" says St Jerome. "All religious perfection consists in suppressing one's own will, in other words in the practice of obedience" says St Bonaventure. "The speech of the obedient will always be heard" says the Holy Spirit. St Gregory the Great concludes that obedience leads to the possession of all other virtues and likewise preserves them all.

This obedience however ought to follow the example of the Saviour, who practised it even in the most difficult things, even to death on the cross. And should the glory of God demand as much from us, we also ought to be obedient, even to the point of sacrificing our lives.

The express orders of the Superiors, therefore, and the rules of the Congregation and the customs of each house ought to be obeyed. And should anyone at times be guilty of failing in them, let him readily ask pardon of the one whom he has disobeyed. This act of humility helps immensely towards obtaining forgiveness for the fault committed, and obtains grace from the Lord for the future and so keeps us on our guard from falling into the same fault again.

St Paul the Apostle, recommending the practice of this virtue, says: “Obey your leaders and submit to them; for they are keeping watch over your souls as men who will have to give account. Let them do this joyfully and not sadly, for that would be of no advantage to you.”

Note well that doing only the things that are pleasing to us and which are for our gratification, is not true obedience but is merely following our own will. True obedience, which makes us dear to God and to our Superiors, consists in cheerfully doing whatever is commanded by our Constitutions or by the Superiors themselves; for, as St Paul says, “*God loves the cheerful giver.*” It consists too in showing ourselves docile, even in things which are most difficult and contrary to self-love, and performing them courageously even at the cost of pain and sacrifice. In these cases obedience is more difficult, but it is also more meritorious and leads us to the possession of the kingdom of heaven according to the words of our divine Redeemer: “*the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and men of violence take it by force.*”

If you practise obedience in this way I guarantee, in the Lord’s name, that you will lead a truly peaceful and happy life in the Congregation. But at the same time I must also tell you that the day you choose not to act according to obedience but according to your own will, you will begin to feel discontented with your state in life. And if in religious orders some are found to be discontented or for whom community life is a burden, it will be seen on close observation that this springs from the want of obedience and submission of their own will. If you become discontented reflect on this and know how to remedy it.

Poverty

If we do not leave the world for the sake of love, one day we shall have to leave it of necessity. Those on the other hand who leave it spontaneously will receive a hundredfold of graces in the present life and an eternal reward in the life to come. Whoever cannot make this sacrifice voluntarily will have to make it at the point of death, yet without recompense for it, and with the obligation of rendering to God a strict account of all the things he has possessed.

It is true that our Constitutions permit the possession and use of all civil rights; but after entering the Congregation one cannot any longer either administer or dispose of things that are his own without the consent of the Superior and then only within the limits prescribed by him, so that in the Congregation one is considered as literally possessing nothing, having made oneself poor to become rich with Jesus Christ. He is following the example of our Saviour who was born into poverty, lived deprived of all things and died stripped of his clothes on the cross.

Let us listen to what our divine Master says: *“So therefore whoever of you does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple.”* To another who desired to be amongst his followers he said, *“Go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.”* To his disciples he used to say that they should not have more than one garment, nor give thought to what they might need in their preaching. In fact we do not read that Jesus himself or his apostles, or any of his disciples possessed land, houses, furniture, clothes, food or drink or the like. St Paul says clearly that the followers of Christ, wherever they go and whatever they do, ought to be content with the food that is strictly necessary for life and with clothing to cover them. *But if we have food and clothing, with these we shall be content.*

Everything that goes beyond food and clothing is superfluous for us and contrary to a religious vocation. It is true that at times we shall have to suffer some inconvenience on our journeys, at work, in times of health and in sickness; we shall sometimes have food, clothing or other things not to our liking; but it is precisely then that we ought to bear in mind that we have made the profession of poverty and that if we wish to have its merit and reward we ought to bear with its consequences. Let us be on our guard against the kind of poverty censured by St Bernard when he says: *“There are some who glory in being called poor, but who will not bear the consequences of poverty. There are those too who are content to be poor provided they want for nothing.”*

Should our state of poverty however cause us any inconvenience or suffering let us rejoice with St Paul who declares that he is overjoyed with his affliction. Or again let us do as did the apostles who were filled with happiness when

they returned from the Sanhedrin, because they had been counted worthy to suffer for the name of Jesus. It is precisely to this sort of poverty that our divine Redeemer not only promised heaven, but assured us of it saying: *“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”* Moreover to live in such a state, to dwell willingly in a room that is uncomfortable or poorly furnished, to wear plain apparel, eat coarse and common food, greatly honours him who has made the vow of poverty because it makes him like Jesus Christ.

It is also part of poverty not to damage anything, to take care of books, clothes, shoes; or also not to be ashamed of using things or wearing garments that are old, mended, or somewhat threadbare.

Chastity

The virtue that is supremely necessary, the great virtue, the angelic virtue, the one to crown all others, is the virtue of chastity. He who has this virtue can apply to himself the words of the Holy Spirit: *“All good things come to me along with her.”* Our Saviour assures us that those who gain this priceless treasure become, even in this life, like the angels of God. But this spotless lily, this precious rose, this pearl beyond all price is beset everywhere by the enemy of souls because he well knows that if he succeeds in snatching it from us, the whole affair of our sanctification may be said to be ruined. Light is changed into darkness, flame into black coal, and the angel of Heaven into Satan, so that every virtue is lost. Here, my dear sons, I believe it will be very useful for your souls if I single out things, which if put into practice, will be to your great advantage; indeed I feel that I can assure you they will preserve this virtue for you and all others as well. Bear in mind then:

1. Do not enter the Congregation before you have consulted some prudent person who will judge if you are likely to be able to keep this virtue.

2. Avoid familiarity with persons of the other sex, and never indulge in special friendships with any of the boys Divine Providence entrusts to our care. Charity and good manners with all but sentimental attachment to none. On this point St Jerome says: *“Either love none or love all equally well.”*

3. After night prayers go straight to rest and hold no further conversation with anyone until after holy Mass the next day.

4. Keep the senses under control. The Holy Spirit clearly says that the body weighs down the soul. St Paul therefore, although weighed down by his labours, subdued his body with severe self-discipline and wrote: "*I pommel my body and subdue it.*" I recommend special moderation in eating and drinking. Wine and chastity cannot go together.

5. The haunts, persons and things of the world present grave dangers for chastity. Keep away from them with all care and not only in body but also in mind and in heart. I do not remember having read or heard it said that a religious had visited his native place and brought back any spiritual advantage. On the contrary there are thousands and thousands who, showing themselves unconvinced of this, have tried it out but were bitterly deceived, while not a few of them found themselves the unhappy victims of their own imprudence and temerity.

6. The exact observance of our holy rules, and especially of the vows and the practices of piety, triumphs over every vice, and is the faithful guardian of chastity. The Christian religion may justly be compared with a strong and fortified city, according to these words of Isaiah: "*We have a strong city: he sets up salvation as walls and bulwarks.*" The vows and rules of a religious community may well be regarded as so many lesser advance fortifications. The walls, the ramparts of religion are the commandments of God and his Church.

To cause their violation the devil makes use of every strategy and deception. But in order to induce religious to transgress, he contrives in the first place to level the outposts and advanced fortifications to the ground, the rules and constitutions of their institute. When the great enemy of souls seduces a religious and makes him violate the divine commandments he first causes him to be careless in things of less importance, and then in things of greater moment; afterwards, he leads him easily enough to break the law of the Lord so proving the truth the Holy Spirit proclaims: "*He who despises small things will fail little by little.*"

Let us then, dear sons, be faithful to the exact observance of our rules, if we want to be faithful to the divine commandments, especially to the sixth and ninth. Let us also with constancy and diligence be solicitous in the exact observance of the practices of piety, the foundation and support of all religious institutes, and then we shall live chaste, almost angelic lives.

Fraternal charity

We cannot love God without also loving our neighbour. The same precept which commands us to love God, commands us also to love our neighbour. In fact we read these words in the First Letter of St John the Evangelist: *“And this commandment we have from him, that he who loves God should love his brother also.”* In the same verse the apostle warns us *“If someone says he loves God and hates his brother, he is a liar.”*

When this brotherly love reigns in a community towards one another and all rejoice in the other’s good just as if it were their own, then that house becomes Heaven itself and justifies the words of the Prophet David: *“How good and pleasant it is when brothers live in unity.”* But as soon as self love gains dominion there, and disagreements and dislikes arise amongst the members, then that house quickly resembles Hell. Our Lord takes great pleasure in seeing brethren living in his house in *unum*, that is, united in heart and mind, serving God and helping one another in charity. This is the praise that St Luke had for the early Christians, that they so loved one another that it seemed they had but one heart and one soul.

A great deal of harm is done in religious communities by fault-finding, which is directly opposed to charity. *A murmurer defiles his own soul and is hated in his neighbourhood.* On the contrary what edification that religious gives who always speaks so well of his fellow religious and when occasion arises seeks to excuse his failings! Be careful therefore to avoid all that savours of fault-finding, especially against your companions and still more against your superiors. It is also a case of fault-finding and even worse to put a bad interpretation on virtuous actions or say that they were done with a bad intention.

Be on your guard against telling a companion the evil another may have said of him, for the trouble and rancour that come from it may last for months and even years. What an account these tale-bearers in communities will have to render to God! A man who sows discord among brothers ... is an abomination to him. If you hear anything against another, do what the Holy Spirit enjoins: *“Have you heard a word? Let it die with you.”*

Be careful not to vex any of your brethren even though it be in jest. Jokes which cause displeasure to our brother and give him offence are contrary to charity. Would you like to be laughed at and derided by others as you hold up your brother to be?

Be on your guard too against disputes. Disagreements will sometimes arise over trifles which are mere nothings, from which it is easy to pass to insults and wrangling which destroy unity and offend deplorably against charity.

If you love charity, try to be affable and gentle in manner to everybody. Meekness is a virtue well loved by Jesus Christ: *“Learn from me,”* he said, *“for I am gentle and humble of heart.”* Whatever you do or say show well-mannered kindness, not only towards superiors but towards all, especially to those who have offended you in the past or who look upon you now with an unkindly eye. Love bears all things; So he who will not bear another’s defects will not have true charity. There is no man on earth, no matter how virtuous he be, who does not have his faults. If therefore he wishes others to bear his defects he should begin by bearing those of others, and thus, as St Paul enjoins, fulfil the law of Christ: *“Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ.”*

We now come to the practice. In the very first place control of one’s temper, so easily lost when there is a disagreement; then be careful not to use words which displease and more still guard against crude and harsh ways of dealing with people, for a rude manner can often be more offensive than insulting words. Whenever a brother who has offended you comes to ask your pardon receive him well, do not treat him curtly and give him a harsh reply; quite otherwise, show true kindness, affection and good will.

If it should happen that it is you who have offended someone, put things right at once, and try to remove all feelings against you from the other’s heart,

mindful of the teaching of St Paul, “Do not let the sun go down on your anger”, and do this as soon as you can and be reconciled with your brother, overcoming the repugnance that you have in your heart.

Do not content yourself with just loving your companions with words only, but go out to help them. St John, the apostle of charity, advises: “*Let us not love in word or in speech but in deed and in truth.*” Charity also requires compliance with the reasonable requests of others; but the best of all acts of charity is to have zeal for our neighbour’s spiritual good. Whenever an occasion arises for doing good never say that this is not my business, I will not meddle with it; this is the answer given by Cain who dared to answer God, saying: “*Am I my brother’s keeper?*” Everyone is bound when he can to save his brother from ruin. God himself commands that we take due care of our fellow man. Endeavour therefore to help everyone, both by word and deed, but especially in prayer.

It is a great stimulus to charity to see Jesus Christ in our neighbour and to recall that the good we do to someone is regarded by the Lord as done to himself: “*Truly I say to you: as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.*” From what has been said you see how necessary and how desirable is this beautiful virtue of charity! Practise it and you will receive blessings in abundance from Heaven.

Practices of piety

Just as food nourishes and preserves the body so do the practices of piety nourish the soul and make it strong in time of temptation. As long as we observe our practices of piety, we shall live in harmony with everyone and we shall see the Salesian cheerful in spirit and happy in his vocation. If on the other hand he neglects them, he will begin to have doubts about his vocation and will undergo strong temptations. Church history shows us that Religious Orders and Congregations have all flourished and promoted the good of religion as long as piety was maintained in vigour amongst them; on the other hand we have seen not a few fall into decay, and others cease to exist, and when? Only when the spirit of piety grew lax and their members began to seek

the things that were their own, and not the things which are of Jesus Christ, as St Paul lamented concerning certain Christians.

If therefore, my sons, we value the glory of our Congregation; if we want it to spread and continue its prosperity for the good of our own and for our neighbours' souls, let us be really solicitous never to omit meditation, spiritual reading, the daily visit to the Blessed Sacrament, our weekly Confession, frequent and devout Communion, the Rosary of Our Lady, a little mortification on Friday and other things like that. Although each one of these practices taken by itself does not seem to be a thing of any great necessity, nevertheless it contributes efficaciously to the building up of our Christian perfection and salvation. *"If you would increase and grow great in God's sight,"* says St Augustine, *"begin with the little things."*

The fundamental practice of piety which in some way embraces them all, consists in making the retreat each year and the exercise for a happy death every month.

He who cannot make this latter exercise in common, should with the permission of his Superior, make it by himself, and he whose occupations will not allow him to employ a whole day upon it should employ at least a part, putting off to another day such work as is not strictly necessary. But let all, more or less, follow these rules:

1. Besides the usual morning meditation, let there be a half-hour's meditation as well the preceding evening on the last things.
2. The Confession which all should make on that day should be more than an ordinary act, having in mind that it may indeed be the last, and holy Communion should be received as though it were Viaticum.
3. Let each one reflect for at least half an hour on the progress or otherwise in virtue during the month, and this especially with regard to observance of the rule; and let firm resolutions be made.
4. Let all the rules of the Congregation, or at least part thereof, be read on that day.

5. On that day it would be good, say, to choose some saint as a protector for the coming month.

It is my belief that the salvation of a religious may justly be said to be assured if he approaches the Sacraments every month and puts his conscience in order as if he were really about to leave this life for eternity. If therefore we hold the honour of our Congregation dear, if we really desire the salvation of our soul, let us be observant of our rule and let us also be exact in the most ordinary things, for he who fears God neglects nothing which contributes to his greater glory.

The “Rendiconto” (manifestation) and its importance

Confidence in Superiors is one of the things that contributes in a special way to the well-being of a religious society, and to the peace and happiness of each member. By this confidence the members open their hearts to their superior to find relief for the troubles they may have, anxieties connected with their duties cease, and the superiors are able to make provision to avoid unpleasantness and discontent. They get to know the moral and physical strength of the confreres and in consequence can give them those tasks for which they seem best suited. Should any disorder creep in, it is at once discovered and a remedy applied. For this reason it has been laid down that each one should meet with his Superior at least once a month. In this connection our Constitutions say that each one should make known with simplicity and readiness his external faults against the rule, progress made in virtue, difficulties met with, and whatever else he feels the need to reveal to receive counsel and comfort.

The chief points with which such a manifestation ought to deal are as follows: 1. Health. 2. Study or work. 3. Whether he is able to fulfil his obligations and what diligence he shows. 4. Whether he has sufficient time to perform his religious duties and what diligence he shows in fulfilling them. 5. How he manages at prayer and meditation. 6. With what frequency, devotion and fruit he approaches the Sacraments. 7. How he observes his vows and whether he has any doubts about his vocation. But it should be noted well

that the manifestation only concerns external matters and not matters for Confession. 8. Whether he has any vexations or troubles, or feels any coolness towards anyone. 9. Whether he knows of any disorder to which a remedy can be applied, especially if it is a case of preventing some offence against God.

Here now are some words of St Francis de Sales on this subject:

“Every month let each one, in a brief and concise manner, open his heart to his superior, and in all simplicity and faithful confidence lay before him all his secrets with the same simplicity and candour that a child has when it shows its mother the scratches and bruises, wasp stings it may have received. In this way each one shall give an account, not so much of his acquisitions and progress, as of his losses and failings in the exercise of prayer, virtue and the spiritual life, indicating also his temptations and interior troubles not only for his consolation, but for his humiliation too. Happy are those who devoutly and sincerely practise this rule, which contains a portion of that holy infancy which is so much recommended by Our Lord from which proceeds and by which is preserved all true peace of mind.”

Rectors are urged never to omit the manifestations of their members. Let all be persuaded that if they make it well, with perfect openness and humility, they will find in it great relief of soul and a powerful aid to progress in virtue, and the whole Congregation will greatly profit by it.

One point on which I recommend the greatest clarity is that of vocation. Let no mystery be made about this with superiors. This is the most important point of all, because on it depends the thread of the life we have to lead. Unhappy he who hides doubts he has about his vocation and determines to leave without seeking good advice and without the opinion of his spiritual director. Such a one might endanger his eternal salvation.

The first reason why it is important and necessary to deal with Superiors in all sincerity is because it enables them the better to govern and direct the members. The Superior is obliged to rule and direct; this is his office. To be a Rector and Superior is precisely this. But if he does not know them because they are not open with him, he cannot possibly direct and help them with counsel and suggestion.

The second reason, which makes what has gone before more obvious, is that the greater the knowledge that the Superiors have of the confreres, the greater will be their care and concern to guard and guide them in times of danger and in difficulties of all kinds arising from time and place.

There is a third reason why sincerity and confidence with Superiors is important: they are thus better enabled to arrange for and provide what is best for the whole Congregation of whose well-being and honour, together with the honour of each member, by their office they have the duty to take care. When anyone therefore deals frankly with them and gives a full account of himself, the Superior, while safeguarding the member's honour and never compromising him, can then have regard for the general good of the whole Congregation. But if the member does not so open his heart, he could perhaps expose to danger both his own honour and his own soul, and also the honour of the community itself, which depends in some measure on his own. Very great indeed is the happiness and satisfaction of the religious who is as an open book to his superior to whom all that disturbs him is well known! If he is charged with office, then he can put his whole trust in God who will come to his aid and keep him free from trouble. "Lord," he will be able to say "I did not put myself here; I made known my lack of qualities, my too small spiritual worth: you, Lord, it is who have sent me, you have commanded it, so supply for my shortcomings." With this trust he can say with St Augustine: "*Lord, give me what you command and command what you will.*" God is placed, as it were, under an obligation of giving what he asks. But he who is not open, does not reveal his weaknesses, what consolation can he expect? It is neither God nor obedience that sends him, but his own will to put himself forward; he is an intruder, neither called nor bidden and he will not succeed.

Doubts about vocation

He who consecrates himself to God by the holy vows makes a most precious offering and one that is most pleasing to the Divine Majesty.

But the great enemy of souls, being aware that by this means one emancipates himself from his service, is wont to trouble his mind with a

thousand illusions in order to make him turn back and induce him to walk along the perilous way of the world. The chief stratagem which he employs for this purpose is to raise doubts respecting vocation, and these doubts are followed by discouragement, tepidity and often a return to that world which we have so often found to be a traitor and had at last abandoned for the sake of God.

Should you, my dearest children, ever be assailed by this dangerous suggestion, you should immediately reply in your heart that when you entered the congregation, God granted the precious gift of a vocation; and if this has now become doubtful you are facing a temptation to which you are perhaps giving occasion and which you ought to treat with contempt and fight against as a real diabolical suggestion. Often the agitated mind says to the doubting one: *"You could do better elsewhere."* But you respond immediately with the words of St Paul who says: *"Let every man abide in the same calling in which he was called."* Indeed St Paul begs us to walk virtuously and firmly in the vocation in which we find ourselves, saying: *"I beg of you, walk in a manner befitting the vocation to which you are called, with all humility and meekness, with patience."* If you remain in your Institute and observe its rules exactly you will be assured of attaining your salvation. On the other hand we know from sad experience that those who have left for the most part remain deceived. Some regretted their action and found no more peace; others were exposed to serious dangers and some even became a stumbling block [scandal] to others with great risk to their own and others' salvation.

While your mind and your heart are troubled by doubts or some passion, I urge you not to take any decisions whatsoever, because such decisions cannot be in accordance with the will of the Lord, which, as the Holy Spirit says, *"is not found in the whirlwind."* In these cases I advise you to present yourself to your superiors, open your heart to them sincerely, faithfully follow their advice. Whatever they suggest, do it and certainly you will not make a mistake. For the Saviour pledges himself to the advice of our superiors, assuring us that their answers are as if given by himself, saying: *"Whoever listens to you, listens to me."*

Five faults to be avoided

Experience shows us five faults, which like the woodworm destroy religious observance and ruin religious Congregations. They are: an itching for reform, personal selfishness; complaining; neglect of duty; forgetfulness that we work for God.

1. Let us fight shy of all itching for reform. Let us instead apply ourselves to the observance of the rule without being preoccupied with its improvement or reform. “If the Salesians,” said our great benefactor Pius IX “without pretending to make their Constitutions better make the effort to preserve them precisely, their Congregation will flourish ever more and more.”

2. We renounce our self-interest. Therefore let us not seek our own personal good, but rather let us work with zeal for the common good of the Congregation. We have to love one another, help one another by counsel and prayer; we have to advance the honour of our confreres not as if it concerned just one alone but as a noble and essential heritage in which we all share.

3. Let us not complain about our superiors nor disapprove of the arrangements they make. Whenever we become aware of something materially or morally wrong, with humility let us point it out to the superiors. They have the duty before God to watch over both persons and things so that they, and they alone, have to give an account of their government and administration.

4. Let no one neglect his own duty. The Salesians considered together form one single body—the Congregation. If all members do what is expected of them, then things will proceed with order, and give satisfaction; otherwise their will be disorder, disunion, rupture and the final undoing of the body itself. Let everyone do his duty well, with zeal and humility, with confidence in God; let him not yield in defeat if he is called to some sacrifice which costs much. Let him take heart that his endurance and fatigue benefits the Congregation to which we are all consecrated.

5. In all we do, our duty, work, troubles or sufferings, we must never forget that we are consecrated to God; it is for love of him alone that we work and from him alone that we hope for reward. The least thing done for his name’s

sake is not left forgotten. It is of faith that in his own good time he will give us rich recompense. At the end of our lives as we stand before his judgement seat, he will say, with radiant love: *“Well done, good and faithful servant, you have been faithful over a little, I will set you over much; enter into the joy of your master.”*

My dear Salesians,

All that I have briefly touched on here will be more fully developed for you in an appropriate manual. Meanwhile receive these rules as an inheritance for the whole Congregation.

Receive the thoughts that preface them as reminders that I leave you as a father before my departure for eternity which I see is rapidly approaching.

Pray to the Lord for the salvation of my soul and I will pray constantly for you too, so that by the exact observance of our Constitutions we can live faithfully here on earth, and through the Divine Mercy, be all together one day to enjoy and praise God in eternal bliss. Amen.

Feast of the Assumption, August 15, 1875.

Yours affectionately in Jesus Christ,

Fr John Bosco