

The State of Perfection

An Address of Pope Pius XII to the Second World Congress of the States of Perfection

Sous la maternelle

December 11, 1957

UNDER the maternal protection of Mary Immaculate, the most exalted of all creatures, and the model of those who tend to the perfection of the Christian life, you have wished, dear sons and daughters, to assemble at Rome to study the current problems of the "states of perfection," while celebrating at the same time the fiftieth anniversary of the ordination to the priesthood of the very worthy and zealous Cardinal Prefect of the Sacred Congregation of Religious.

In more than twenty-five nations of all the continents, there exist today associations of major superiors, both men and women, who, in close union with the Holy See and with the ecclesiastical hierarchy of their countries, are striving to realize by common effort the tasks of organization and adaptation, required by the variety and complexity of today's apostolate.

We know that numerous projects have been realized during these past few years under the enlightened leadership of your associations.

It will be enough to mention the national and regional congresses of the states of perfection, sessions of prayer and study, and particularly the establishment of institutes for the formation of members of the states of perfection and for their higher religious studies.

The purpose of this Congress

The present Congress, which is a whole-hearted response to the desire to achieve an ever more complete incorporation of the "states of perfection" into the Church, the Mystical Body of Christ, has as its purpose: first, to make an accounting of the progress realized all over the world in the organization of the states of perfection and in their work of adaptation to the needs of the Church; second, to set forth clearly the ends to pursue, the limitations to respect, and the principles to observe in the work of the conferences, unions, and committees of major superiors; and, finally, to work out a program of activities and of projects which will assure the effectiveness of the

movement of renovation, by drawing tighter the bonds which unite these organizations with one another and with the Holy See.

The entire program of this Congress is a commentary on three Apostolic Constitutions, *Provida Mater*, *Sponsa Christi*, and *Sedes Sapientiae*,¹ as well as on the decree of the Sacred Congregation of Religious, *Salutaris atque*, in which are set forth the norms which should guide efforts at adaptation and renovation.

We do not intend to tarry here on particular questions which you intend to treat during your sessions; We wish rather to emphasize certain points of a general nature concerning the problem of perfection and that of the renovation and adaptation of the means whereby individuals and communities tend to perfection. We shall speak first of the perfection of the Christian life in general, then of its realization in the groups which are called "states of perfection," considering the relations these have with their members, with one another, and with the Holy See.

¹ An English translation of *Sedes sapientiae* appeared in THE POPE SPEAKS (Winter 1956-57) v. 3, no. 3, p. 287. Reprints are available.—Ed.

I

THE PERFECTION OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

It is important, first of all, to recall that the concept of "perfection" in the strict sense is not identical with that of "state of perfection," but has a far wider application. We can find examples of heroic Christian perfection, the perfection of the Gospels and of the Cross of Christ, in persons who are not in any of the "states of perfection."

The tendency to perfection

We understand, then, by "tending to perfection," an habitual disposition of the Christian soul, by which—not content with merely fulfilling the duties binding on her under pain of sin—she gives herself entirely to God, to love Him and to serve Him, and she consecrates herself, with the same end in view, to the service of her neighbor.

The perfection of all free human activity, as well as that of every rational creature, consists in voluntary adherence to God. For a reason which derives from the very

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The Congress of the States of Perfection brought together major superiors of religious congregations from thirty-one countries. American delegates were Very Rev. Celsus Wheeler, O.F.M., president of the Conference of Major Superiors of the U.S.A., and Very Rev. Charles Burns, O.M.I., a member of the Conference's executive committee.

condition of the creature, that perfection is obligatory: it is necessary to tend toward perfection under pain of missing one's last end. We do not have to enumerate its elements here. It is Our intention merely to speak of that habitual and permanent tendency, which, going beyond all that falls under the notion of obligation, embraces the whole man in order to consecrate him without reserve to the service of God. That perfection consists, par excellence, in union with God, brought about by charity. It is accomplished, consequently, in charity. It is also called a perpetual and entire holocaust of oneself, undertaken for the love of God and in order deliberately to manifest one's love for Him.

The ideal of Christian perfection is intrinsically allied to the teachings of Christ, in particular to the evangelical counsels, to His life, His passion, and His death—inexhaustible fountains whence the heroism of all Christian generations draws its strength. It embraces also the mission of Christ for them, that is, the service of the Church, accomplished through love of the Lord, in the position and according to the function proper to each one in the ensemble of the Mystical Body.

The secular institute

Every Christian is invited to tend to this ideal with all his powers, but he realizes it in a complete and more sure way in the three "states of perfection," according to the manner described by Canon Law and the Apostolic Constitutions already mentioned. In particular, the Constitution *Provida*

Mater of February 2, 1947, on "secular institutes," gives access to the states of perfection to the greatest possible number of souls, who today ardently aspire to the more perfect life. It is true that that Constitution affirms that associations not satisfying the prescribed norms do not constitute "states of perfection," but it does not imply thereby that outside the "states of perfection" there does not exist a true tending to perfection.

We think at this moment of the large number of men and women of all conditions, who have assumed in the modern world the most varied and diverse professions and responsibilities, and who, through love of God and in order to serve Him in their neighbor, consecrate to Him their person and all their activity. They bind themselves to the practice of the evangelical counsels by private and secret vows, known to God alone, and allow themselves to be guided, in all that concerns the submission of obedience and poverty, by those whom the Church has judged suitable to give such guidance, and to whom she has confided the responsibility of directing others in the pursuit of perfection. None of the elements which constitute Christian perfection and the effective tending to its acquisition is beyond the reach of these men and women; they truly participate in them, therefore, even though they are not engaged in any juridical and canonical state of perfection.

Conditions of modern life

It is clear that Christian perfection, in the essential elements of its

definition and of its realization, has no need of any renovation or adaptation. But since the conditions of modern life undergo profound changes, the manner of devoting oneself to the pursuit of perfection will require modifications. These changes will affect both those who live in a state of perfection and those who do not, but especially the latter, and above all if they belong to an elevated social rank or exercise great responsibilities. They are constrained, in such circumstances, to surround themselves with a certain degree of affluence, to participate in official festivities, to use costly means of transportation—all of which seem difficult to reconcile with a constant concern to mortify some desire or other in order to follow and imitate the poor and humble Christ. And yet, in the midst of material goods, they do not waver in any way from the entire consecration of themselves to God, and do not cease to offer to the Lord a holocaust without reserve. Such is the work of grace, which operates in man according to the word of Christ, "Things that are impossible with men are possible with God." (*Luke* 18, 27)

II

THE STATES OF PERFECTION

We shall now give our attention exclusively to the problems of adaptation and renovation in the "states of perfection," and We shall consider first, the persons who compose them, then the communities themselves, in their tending toward perfection.

THE MEMBERS OF THE STATES OF PERFECTION

On the subject of individual persons, We shall emphasize one point only, namely, that what We have said in the first part of Our discourse, on the perfection of the Christian life in general, applies as well to all the members of the "states of perfection," and forms their first and essential duty, whether they be subjects or superiors. They should unite themselves to God by charity, and offer themselves to Him as a holocaust, to imitate and follow Christ, His doctrine, His life, His Cross, to consecrate themselves to the service of Christ's work, the Church, as chosen and active members of the Mystical Body.

But once that essential obligation is firmly established, nothing prohibits one from considering the renovation and adaptation of the means to realize this obligation, never failing in the respect due to tradition, and without departing from the prescriptions that the Constitutions consider inviolable. Subjects will observe, furthermore, that religious discipline, which prohibits them from arrogating to themselves what is invested in the competency of superiors, and from undertaking on their own initiative changes which they cannot attempt without the authorization of their superiors.

THE COMMUNITIES THEMSELVES

A first point presents itself for Our examination: the mutual relations between the community as a whole and the individual members,

subjects and superiors, who compose it. Two important elements here demand Our consideration: first, the characteristic spirit by which the mutual relations of communities with their members are expressed; then, the obstacles which arise from certain prejudices against religious obedience, the virtue on which depends essentially the renovation of the spirit proper to the community.

An organized society is a whole; it has an aspect that is characteristic of it, which each one of the members helps to form. All effort at adaptation, undertaken within the group, necessarily involves certain modifications of its proper spirit. That is to say, its most vital sensibilities are affected to some degree. Now, every society wants to keep its spirit intact, as is its right and its duty; it desires to see its members impregnated with this spirit, and preoccupied with the task of filling their lives with it. The Church and the Sovereign Pontiffs, in approving a definite type of life, intend that it be preserved in all its purity, and they watch over it with care.

If we agree in recognizing that it is the major superiors who have the right to point out to their subjects the spirit of their community, a question still remains for all of us to answer: where shall we find the objective expression of that spirit? The major superiors cannot decide it according to their taste or their impression, even in all good faith and sincerity. If the major superior is also the founder, and if he has received from the Church the approbation of his personal

ideas as the norm of a state of perfection, he has a perfect right to appeal to his own intentions. But, where he is not the founder, he should have recourse to the idea of the founder as it is expressed in the Constitutions approved by the Church. It is not sufficient for him, then, to have a subjective conviction, even one supported by an isolated passage of the Constitutions.

When the superior proposes to the members of his community the true spirit of the founder, he exercises his right, and the subjects should in conscience obey him. The rights of superiors and the duties of subjects are in this matter correlative. It is ever the intention of the Church and of the Sovereign Pontiffs to defend these rights and to urge these duties, but without trespassing upon just limitations. To avoid annoyance to each other and to preserve peace, it is sufficient that each recognize and employ this norm, which has been that of the Church and of the Popes through the centuries, and remains ever in force.

Objections to religious obedience

To pass now to the current difficulties concerning religious obedience, it has been observed that the movement of adaptation has provoked in this domain a certain tension; not that a sincere desire to tend to perfection through obedience is wanting, but because certain aspects of obedience are emphasized today which even serious religious, religious of delicate conscience, would wish to see disappear.

Obedience is accused, particular-

ly, of putting the human dignity of the religious in peril, of hindering the maturing of his personality, of deflecting his orientation toward God alone. These objections, it seems, arise from certain disillusionments experienced personally or observed in others, and they are also related to various juridical considerations.

In order to dispel the feeling of sadness which arises from erroneous interpretation of the principles which govern the religious life, or from practical errors in their application, let Us recall first of all the word of our Savior, "Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest, . . . and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart; and you will find rest for your souls." (*Matt.* 11, 29) And if our Lord thus exhorts men to take His yoke upon them, it is in order to teach them that beyond legal observance, easily burdensome and hard to endure, they have to discover the sense of true submission and of Christian humility. Far from offending the dignity of him who submits to them, these virtues free him interiorly; they represent to him the acceptance of his state of subjection not as a restraint imposed from without, but as a giving of himself back to God, whose Will is expressed through the visible authority of those who are commissioned to command. The superior, on his part, will exercise his powers in the same evangelical spirit: "Let him who is greatest among you become as the youngest, and him who is the chief as the servant." (*Luke* 22, 26) The nec-

essary firmness of the superior will, then, always be accompanied by a deep respect and by the tenderness of a paternal heart.

The development of the personality

Is the religious state an obstacle to the harmonious development of the human personality? Does it force it to remain in a certain childishness, as some allege?

Just observe without prejudice the conduct of the men and the women who are members of the states of perfection! No one would dare to affirm, certainly, that the majority of them suffer from childishness in their intellectual or emotional life, or in their activity. And, pursuing the objection a step further, it can not be claimed that the communities and the superiors constrain them to adopt in the course of time manners of thought and action which give rise to this reproach. Those who so complain ought to recall that St. Paul, in pointing out to the faithful the goal of a life ordered according to faith, invites them to "grow up as the Body of Christ grows" until they attain "the perfect manhood, to the mature measure of the fullness of Christ. Thus, we shall no longer be children, tossed to and fro." (*Eph.* 4, 12-13) The apostle, therefore, does not permit the faithful to surrender to childishness, but he demands that they become "perfect men." Furthermore, in the first epistle to the Corinthians, he rejects in the most explicit terms all manner of childish thinking and acting on the part of adult Christians. "When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I felt as a child, I

thought as a child. Now that I have become a man, I have put away the things of a child." (1 *Cor.* 13, 11)

This text We cited once before, in Our allocution of April 18, 1952, on the education of the Christian conscience, in order to recall that the role of a sound education is to teach men to make judicious use of their liberty and to learn to do without the teacher. Let every member of the states of perfection, superior and subject, make personal application of the words of the Apostle; then, all danger of childishness will vanish, without loss of respect for legitimate authority or of sincere submission to its decisions.

We will not tarry over what We said in Our allocution of December 8, 1950, at the first Congress of the States of Perfection, in answer to the objections advanced against an alleged lessening of the personal and social value of the religious: if his rights suffer a certain limitation, the state to which he belongs and the offering that he makes of himself by obedience confer on him a dignity which generously recompenses him for the sacrifice he freely makes.

The motive of religious obedience

The argument is also advanced against obedience that the dependence of man on his superior is opposed to the supreme and direct dominion of God over the conscience. To allege that one man depends on another even in his personal life and activity, is that not to confer on the superior prerogatives reserved to God alone?

The fact is that the Church has never defended or approved such a

thesis. It regards obedience as a means to lead man to God. Because the motive that inspired it is that of union with God, and because its end is increase in charity, the superior in no wise constitutes an obstacle between God and the subject, nor does he turn to his own profit the homage addressed to God. The superior can command only in the name of the Lord and in virtue of the powers of his charge; and the subject should obey only through love of Christ and not for human motives of utility or propriety, still less through pure compulsion. In this way, he will preserve, in the most complete submission, the joyous eagerness of one who ratifies, by the concrete acts of each day, the total gift of himself to his one and only Master.

Union and cooperation

The program of your Second General Congress indicates that you will be giving ample treatment to the relations of the communities with one another, as part of the movement of renovation and adaptation which you pursue. Besides, it is not Our intention to enter into details here. We are confident, moreover, that the regulations established by the Sacred Congregation of Religious will be faithfully observed.

It will be sufficient for Us to recall that, while respecting the distinctions which exist and which ought to exist among the communities, it is necessary that you tend with sincerity and friendliness toward unity and cooperation. There exists, in fact, a sort of "common good" of the religious communities,

which supposes that each one is moved to be thoughtful of the others and to adapt itself to the exigencies of coordination, which requires necessarily some renouncement in view of the common good.

Of your communities, united by divine grace in the Body of the Church, the words of St. Paul in the well-known passage of first Corinthians (12, 12-27), on the relations of the members to one another, are applicable by analogy: each of those who are part of the Body merit by this title the help and the cooperation of all, in view of the one common good, that of the Church. It is easy to deduce from this the sentiments of esteem, of friendliness, of kindness, the desire to cooperate, the holy emulation, the magnanimous disinterestedness, which will preside over the relations of the communities with one another. Each member ought, assuredly, to preserve its nature and its own function in the body, but it should also understand and respect the function of the others, and know how to work with them in view of the greatest common good.

Religious and the Holy See

What concerns the relations of the states of perfection with the Vicar of Christ and the Holy See need hardly be recalled: the prerogatives of the Apostolic See, which are founded on the institution of Christ Himself, and which the Church in the course of the centuries has only made more clear and precise, must remain undiminished and sacred. If the faithful are to respect them and conform to

them, those who are in the state of perfection must give an example to all in this matter. It is important, therefore, to seek and to maintain contact with the Holy See. In the Encyclical *Humani generis* We have pointed out clearly that the will to avoid this contact and to keep oneself at a distance was an important reason for the errors and the aberrations which are pointed out therein, and this regrettable attitude was the fault in particular of certain members of the states of perfection. This contact, to be efficacious, will be full of confidence, of sincerity, of docility.

The Apostolic See desires to receive from you information, not merely true but also complete, which will enable it to know the true state of each community in what concerns doctrine and life, ascetic formation and observance, religious discipline and temporal administration, and so on. Then only is it possible to promote the good and to correct the evil before it goes too far, because when the favorable dispositions of which We speak are present, the replies, rules, and instructions of the Holy See produce their fruit.

“Centralization”

Still another matter about which We would like to say a timely word is the desire for “centralization” that many reproachfully ascribe to the Holy See. The word “centralization” can designate a system of government which claims all power for itself, decides everything, directs everything, reducing subordinates to the status of mere instruments. Such a system of centrali-

zation is absolutely foreign to the spirit of the Roman Pontiffs and of the Apostolic See. But the Holy See cannot renounce its prerogative of being the directing center of the Church. While leaving to superiors the initiative provided in the Constitutions, it must preserve its right and exercise its function of vigilance.

What should be said on the subject of renovation and adaptation in the relations of the communities with one another and with the Holy See, is sufficiently indicated, it seems to Us, in your program. The principles which We have reviewed indicate the direction to be taken and We do not doubt that you will know how to investigate them thoroughly and with profit.

Conclusion

The terrain of perfection, in which We have walked with you a little, is quite vast and quite beautiful; there remain some sections of it still to be explored. We have focused your attention on perfec-

tion in general and on perfection in the "state of perfection." Numerous in our day are not only the clerics and religious who are interested in these matters, but the laity as well. In the presence of certain modern ideas and principles, both groups perceive serious and complex problems, whose solution, however, is beyond them, despite their eagerness to find it. That is why We have wished to bring them some illumination, by recalling the principles that lead to the desired solution.

In closing this discourse, We will leave you yet one more thought of St. Paul, in his Epistle to the Colossians (3, 14): "Above all these things have charity, which is the bond of perfection." Beyond all problems and discussions, seek first union with God, and you will advance toward perfection without ceasing. Such is the grace that We wish for you and which We implore for you from the Most High as We bestow on you from the bottom of Our heart, Our paternal Apostolic Benediction.

