

congregation about them, and asked as many as possible to meet in the church that evening. To his astonishment a huge crowd of people arrived, including numbers of men. At first listless, they gradually became more and more attentive, and during the singing of the Litany of Loretto, at the words '*Refugium peccatorum ora pro nobis*', they all fell on their knees and repeated the invocation three times.

That was the beginning of the great Archconfraternity at our Lady of Victories. By the year 1880 there were 17,833 associations in France, with stories of extraordinary cures and conversions.

At Fátima there have been, indeed, a great many authentic cures, but the conversions, not only at Fatima, but wherever the devotion is beginning to be understood and established.

The Pope's consecration of the world, in 1942, to the Immaculate Heart of Mary convinced many of the importance of a revelation to the Church which has taken so long to spread and to be accepted. With the consecration of England, in July, first at Walsingham, and then parish by parish, it may be hoped that many will believe that nothing less than the salvation of the world depends on its response to our Lady of Fatima.

St John Eude's book, mentioned above, is full of material for meditation on the sinless and loving heart of Mary, whose concern for the souls of all men is so great, and whose power is as great as her love; leading us to her Son, when all other means have failed to produce anything but tepidity and mediocrity, which are indeed treachery.

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## A LETTER TO RELIGIOUS

BY

ST CATHERINE OF SIENA<sup>1</sup>

*To Brother Filippo di Vannuccio and Brother Niccolo di Piero of Florence, religious, of the Order of Mount Olivet.*



IN the name of Jesus Christ crucified and of sweet Mary. Dearest sons in sweet Jesus Christ. Catherine, servant and slave of the servants of Jesus Christ, writes to you in his precious blood, with a desire to see you established in true and perfect patience. For without patience you would not be pleasing to God, nor would you bear the yoke of holy obedience. Instead you would rise up against your superiors and against your order. Patience is only to be found in him who has

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<sup>1</sup> Translated by D.E.K., O.P. These letters have not appeared before in English.

perfect charity, wherefore he who loves is not upset by what might seem unpleasant, difficult, and even imprudent in observing the customs of the Order and in acting under strict obedience. He who loves soon forgets such difficulties, and bearing all things with patience he becomes immediately humbled and truly obedient. He does not rise up against his superiors through pride. He will be as obedient as he is humble, for the more humble he is, the more obedient he will be. O dearest sons, how sweet is the virtue of ready obedience, founded in charity and removing all trouble and pain! Charity is not without patience, nor without humility, for humility is charity's nurse. But let us see a little the fruits of this virtue of obedience, and whether or not they are fruits of life. Let us see too what comes of disobedience.

Every creature endowed with reason, dearest sons, must obey the commandments of God. This obedience wipes away the guilt of mortal sin and receives the life of grace. Only disobedience can produce the guilt of mortal sin. Obedience alone can remove it since it observes the commandments of God's law. He who disobeys offends in that he breaks the commandments and does those things which were forbidden. Thereby he brings about the death of his own soul, seeking the vain pomps and delights which Christ fled, and places himself in the hands of the devil for the sake of satisfying his own selfish lust. He flies from the scorn, the insults and the dishonour that Christ embraced and bore patiently even to his shameful death on the cross. So humbly did Christ bear all this infamy, that he made no complaint. He bore it all to the last, in obedience to the Father, and for the sake of our salvation. He who is obedient follows in the footsteps of the sweet and loving Word of God, seeking God's honour and the salvation of souls. So that you see, every creature endowed with reason must submit to obedience if he desires the life of grace.

This, however, is a general obedience to which all are obliged. There is another, more particular kind of obedience observed by those who not only keep the commandments of God but follow his counsels, since they wish to follow in all things the way of perfection. These are they who have entered the garden of holy religion. They find it easy and pleasant to submit to their superiors if, having learned general obedience, they submit to particular obedience. If such a religious has entered into particular obedience without self-will, as he should, he will have great joy. Even in bitterness he will find all things sweet, and in times of trouble he will know peace. He will sail securely on the stormiest sea, for the ship of holy religion is so powerfully driven by the winds of obedience that no

contrary wind can hinder it. The winds of pride cannot prevail against it since the soul in religion is humble and therefore obedient. Nor can the winds of impatience, for patience is in charity even as marrow is in bone; and the soul is patient since it has entered religion, submitting to superiors and indeed to all creatures through the love it bears towards God. Nor can the wind of unfaithfulness turn the ship from its course, nor that of injustice, since the soul renders to all things their due. It pours loathing on its own sensual nature, ever ready to revolt against obedience were it not subject to the control of reason. It gives glory to God and praise to his holy name. To its fellow beings it brings loving-kindness, bearing gently with their faults. So with a lively faith (which is followed of course by good works) the religious spends his last days in this life awaiting the reward of life eternal which he was promised at his religious profession, on condition that he truly observed the three solemn vows—obedience, chastity and voluntary poverty. The ship of religion is driven so surely to the port of eternal life by the winds of obedience that it never comes to harm on the rocks.

If the favourable winds of obedience did not guide our ship, we should surely be wrecked on one or other of the reefs in this stormy sea of life. What fearful obstacle is that rock where demons, ever restless, attack the soul and try to turn it from its course with many kinds of foul thoughts—most of all at a time when the soul is trying to concentrate all its energies in humble prayer, in order to be made strong in virtue. These demons in their malice do this to make us weary of prayer and holy obedience, trying to convince us that we can never persevere in the work we have begun, nor bear the burden of obedience. And in the tumult a straw will look like a spar, and some little word of discouragement will stab us, seeming to ask 'Why do you come this way, which is so difficult and painful? It would be better for you to go back and find an easier way'. This, however, is an obvious illusion, easily discerned with spiritual understanding. For one sees that it is better for the soul to persevere in constancy in the way already begun. But then comes the hidden attack when we, with full knowledge and hatred of our own failings, realise too how pure and how simple should be our service to God: and the devil says 'You poor fool, you know you should serve God and pray to him with purity and simplicity of heart and mind without any other thought—but you are doing nothing as you ought, so your works are not pleasing to God. Better let things be. . . . We realise the truth well enough, but when the devil lies to us thus, we become confused and fail in our good works, from whence we are ready to fall into wretchedness and despair. All this comes

about with such subtlety that one does not at first realise that one is consenting to the devil's plans. Now who is it who is saved from shipwreck at this point? Only he who is obedient, because in his humility he is given power to break through the devil's snares. He it is who has no servile fear of the devil's attacks and of the thoughts that the evil one may cast through his mind. Let him drown his own will in the blood of Christ crucified. Let him, in the light of true obedience, bind himself with love and reverence to the Incarnate Word of God.

There is a treacherous sandbank in this sea, made up of the weakness and misery of the flesh fighting against the spirit. The flesh is always rebellious and inclined towards corruption in its offensive self-love. Yet it only offends in so far as the will has bound itself to self-love and consented to the weak flesh and delighted in corruption. But if the will is dead to self-love and pleasure, and has united itself to obedience, the flesh cannot harm it for all its striving against the spirit. In fact the wind of obedience blows stronger than ever at this point, and our little ship speeds on its course through the water. For when the soul realises it is being attacked, it arises from the sleep of negligence and comes to the attack armed with humility, self-knowledge and self-hatred. If it did not do this, it would go on sleeping in negligence, its ignorance and presumption giving rise to pride. But the soul becomes humble by reason of the devil's attacks. Did I not say that we are obedient in the same degree that we are humble? If, therefore, the virtue of humility grows in us, the virtue of obedience grows likewise. So you see why the ship travels faster.

Then we come to the rocks that the world sets in our way; and although they are decked out with many attractions, delights, pomps and honours, they are in reality nothing but bitterness and inconsistency. All the delights and pleasures of the world soon come to nothing, like flowers which are beautiful and sweetly scented when we pick them in the fields, yet when picked lose their scent and beauty and quickly fade away. So it is with the beauty and the glory of the world. When they are seized by men of unreasonable lust, they are found to be empty, insipid, unlovely. God's creation is beautiful in that it springs from the mind of God—but he who gathers that beauty cannot gather it into his own soul, by reason of his own defect in not letting it be where he found it, and not loving it simply for the glory of God and the praise of his holy name. Who is there who does not come to grief here? The obedient religious, by observing the vow of voluntary poverty.

So you see that there is no need to fear any of these reefs in the

sea of life, if your ship is driven by the winds of true obedience. The obedient religious has joy, for he navigates, not with his own arms, but with the strength of his Order. No longer is he tortured by self-will for his will is dead and can cause him no more pain. Indeed, works of obedience can only cause us pain in so far as self-will finds them painful. He who is truly obedient, having no will of his own, finds delight in troublesome tasks. Sighs are food to him, and tears are his drink. Tracing the steps of Christ crucified in holy doctrine, he drinks too of the milk of divine sweetness which comes from charity by means of our crucified Lord.

O obedience, you are a queen crowned with strength! You are forever united to the peace and obedience of the divine Word. Your sceptre is steadfast perseverance. Your lap is filled with the lovely flowers of virtue. You turn men into angels, and while they are yet mortal you give them a taste of immortal joys. You bring peace and unity to the discordant. You make us slaves of the least of men, and the more we serve the more we command, for you make us lords over our sensual nature. Divine love has consumed our impetuous self-love, for you have made us obedient for love's sake. The cell of an obedient religious becomes a paradise, because you have made it a place of self-knowledge. His table is the cross, and there he feasts with the obedient lamb of God, on God's honour and the salvation of souls.

Through obedience we no longer judge our fellows and superiors. Obedience has become the judge of the sweet will of God, considering that God desires nothing other than our sanctification. Therefore, all that he allows to happen to us, he gives to that end. Obedience would have us suffer in the sufferings of others, but never to judge them nor murmur against them. Obedience does not wish us to question the will of those who command us; but simply, with prudence and simplicity of heart must we obey in all things where there is no sin. It is well therefore that in bitterness we should taste sweetness, and in time of death that we should know the life of grace.

O my dearest sons! Who would not love to have such sweet and pleasant fruits as obedience brings to the soul? Do you know who it is who will eat this fruit? He who, with the eye of the intellect (whose pupil is holy faith) looks into the mirror of truth and sees there not only himself, but the goodness of God within him. And in that goodness he sees the excellence of this sweet and royal virtue—obedience. Who is it who does not see in this mirror? He who has no light to see by, and therefore sees nothing. Seeing nothing therein, he finds nothing to love. Without love he has no obedience.

He can only be disobedient and will find only death. The winds of disobedience will dash his boat on to the rocks and break it in two. His soul, being deprived of grace, will be drowned in the bitterness of mortal sin. He will have become intolerable to himself, having no brotherly love. He will have violated his vows, observing neither obedience nor continence, for even though he were to observe them in the letter he could not observe them in the spirit. He does not observe the vow of voluntary poverty, since through his indulgence in self-love he has a taste for worldly delights and conversation, and he sickens of prayer and solitude. Oh how much misery he brings upon himself in this way. He loses time, and instead of persevering he turns back. He becomes so weak that the least thing will strike him down. He loses all virtue, and always, as do the proud, he questions and criticises the will of others, particularly of his superiors. No tongue can tell the amount of evil that befalls a disobedient religious. He is always so impatient that he takes offence at the least word. He is surrounded by pitfalls, and even in life he receives the earnest money of hell. What can we say then, except that all ills come from disobedience, for it has neither charity nor humility—the wings that bear us away to life eternal. Nor has it patience, the marrow of charity, and without charity the soul can never learn obedience.

Considering then that we cannot otherwise escape such great misfortunes and achieve the great happiness that obedience gives, I wish to see you established in true and holy obedience. Obedience cannot be had without patience, and patience is born of charity. Through charity you will become patient and obedient, anointed with true and perfect humility.

Onward then my sons, now that you have entered the ship of holy religion. Sail on with the prospering wind of obedience unto death, so that you may reach your end without danger, the end which is eternal life. Bathe yourselves in the blood of Christ crucified. I say no more, only remain in the sweet and holy delight of the presence of God. Sweet Jesus, Jesus love.

Remember me to the prior and to all my other sons. And do you be a mirror of obedience! Sweet Jesus, Jesus love.