

Letter of the Very Reverend Mother Gabrielle Aymer de la Chevalerie addressed, at the request of the members of the 1864 Chapter, to the Sisters of the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary and of Perpetual Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament

Paris, September 19, 1864

My very dear Sisters,

Your good Mothers, returning back to your midst, will tell you that you have never ceased to be present in all our meetings, and that it is your interests and needs that have constantly occupied us during our deliberations.

In regard to the temporal, we are pleased to see that many of our Mother Superiors have been able to give you all that our Holy Rule grants you in this regard, and that those whose resources are scarce are nevertheless doing everything they can to achieve this desired result.

As for the spiritual, undoubtedly the most interesting part of our existence, I have also heard with the greatest satisfaction the good reports that your dear Mothers have given me about you.

They willingly told me of your good will, your piety, your desire to do well in the responsibilities entrusted to you.

In spite of all these good sentiments which animate you, and to which I am happy to testify my satisfaction, my dear sisters, isn't your spiritual life nevertheless susceptible to improvement? You will answer yes, I am convinced, and you will easily agree that by observing even more faithfully the virtues which I am going to recommend to you, you will avoid many faults, acquire great merits, and be happier in this life. Is this not your desire as it is mine?

Reread attentively, my dear sisters, article 5 of the preliminary chapter of our Holy Rule, and ask yourselves if, up to now, you have seriously striven to retrace the crucified life of our Divine Savior, and what efforts you have made to repress your senses. The Holy Spirit has revealed that it is through our windows that death enters our homes, that is, sin enters our souls. Your desire to imitate the Divine Heart of Jesus will then lead you to resolve to be more silent, especially in the morning in leaving the Holy Mass, on the stairs and in the corridors, except during

recreation if it is taken in the corridors; and, at all times, to be more vigilant in maintaining silence which is the means of recollection. In this way you will lead a more interior life, more united to God.

On the other hand, for the edification of the students and strangers with whom we are so often in contact: may we never hear outbursts of voices, immoderate laughter, worldly conversations, indiscreet questions about the families of the sisters, the novices and the students, about the jobs of each one, about the reasons why some of you have moved. In the same way, the sisters who go to a house, either in passing or to live there, must never make known what happens in the community just left; and no one will forget that one is guilty of a more or less serious sin in speaking with little charity of one's sisters, and even more so of one's superiors.

Enjoy yourselves at recreation, my dear sisters; they will be all the more cheerful because you will have made more generously the little sacrifices God will have asked of you. I urge you to be more exact in this exercise of recreation, it has a much greater importance than is generally believed, and I strongly recommend that you do not dispense of it without necessity and without permission. Article 9 of Chapter VIII of our Holy Rule is formal in this regard, so observe it with the utmost accuracy.

If you are obliged to go out or to travel, remember that you should not speak unnecessarily to strangers, nor speak at length among yourselves, which would be unedifying for the secular people who do not fail to observe us. Also have the utmost restraint in the stations and streets, where you should never speak loudly when you are obliged to do so.

But, my dearest sisters, is it not true that the greatest reserve and a truly religious modesty must be observed in travel and outings, is it not also true that it is to be desired that such travel and outings should become more and more rare among us who are called to retrace the hidden life of Our Lord? We must therefore find ourselves in the midst of the world as little as possible, remembering that frequent walks, trips and outings would soon make us lose the spirit of our holy state, and are moreover in direct opposition to the enclosure, of which we must at least have the spirit, until we acquire the practice. In order to keep this spirit, let us

often refer to what was happening during the time our Venerable Founders: no one thought of going out or traveling, and everyone was happy.

The spirit of enclosure should make us fear to be in the world, and also to introduce it into our own home. Consequently, a good religious should not do anything to attract visits, but rather avoid them if she can, and never prolong them unnecessarily. "It seemed to us sufficient to allow the sisters to see their parents once a month when they live in the same city or in the surrounding area, with the exception of fathers and mothers who may come every two weeks. It is to be hoped that the visits will take place on Sunday as much as possible, and that they will not last more than an hour. If there were to be some during the week, it would seem appropriate to stay only half an hour.

You know, my dear Sisters, that during Advent and Lent, times of penance and recollection, we avoid all unnecessary visits, and you write only when it is very necessary.

I know, my dear Sisters, the great respect you have for our Venerable Founders, so it is with confidence that I propose that you renounce certain customs that were unknown in their time, and whose introduction has brought all sorts of inconveniences among us. I am referring to the ease of receiving money from one's parents, and of having particular reserves.

You will agree with me that the desire to possess is quite contrary to the virtue of poverty; yet how many times has one has used many means to get what she wished. Without condemning anyone here, my dear Sisters, and recognizing, on the contrary, that poverty is generally observed in our country, I cannot help but speak out against what seems to me to be contrary to your interests and your happiness. All the members of the General Chapter, whose feelings I am conveying to you here along with my own, think it very essential to return to the traditions and examples of our first Mothers, whose detachment was so perfect and whose poverty so admirable. Therefore, I beg you, my dear Sisters, that there be no more talk among you of special financial backings. Let no Sister ever allow herself to ask anything of anyone, either directly or indirectly. Simply explain your needs and make your requests to your Mother Superiors. I definitely prefer that you receive what you need from the community rather from others. Should not the Sisters who may be tempted to find these recommendations bad or annoying, be afraid that

they are already far removed from the spirit of poverty required by our holy Rule, which suggests that we not even own the clothes we use? You may continue to ask your parents for postage stamps to post the letters you write to them. But they are to be used only for that purpose, and, for the sake of good order, I want you to keep no more than five and that the rest be remitted in deposit with the Mother Superior or the Treasurer.

If, in spite of the spirit of detachment that you must show on every occasion, something is offered to you, my dear sisters, give it promptly to the Mother Superior, being aware that she may freely dispose of it as she sees fit. As for the little gifts that the boarders might wish to give you, say that you cannot receive them; never accept them before they have been able to obtain my permission to offer them to you; for I have reserved the right to give such permission, as the Rule requires. This article proves to you how little the Good Mother intended that gifts be given to you, since she made it so difficult to obtain permission to accept them.

The holy virtue of poverty, as all the others, urges us to renounce all valuables, so we want the sisters to receive as little gold and silver as possible. No rings, no gold watches, no small curious objects that keep alive the taste for the things of the world in the heart of a religious; but, on the contrary, let us always look for the simplest, the most modest, as being much more in conformity with the holy virtue of poverty: this is really what will make us resemble the Divine Child of Bethlehem.

If I did not know your extreme good will, my dear Sisters, I would stop here, and I would not ask some of you for a new sacrifice. But I know you are too generous to renounce what can contribute to your spiritual advancement. So, I will tell you frankly what I think. I notice that all the little chapels that are now so common in our houses have many inconveniences. Thus, one exposes oneself to sin against the vow of poverty by seeking to procure what is necessary to adorn the oratory of the Blessed Virgin and thereby wounds the holy virtue of poverty. It does not matter to the devil what object one holds dear; whether it is a pious statue or anything else, as long as one is attached to it, he is satisfied. Finally, devotion is exhausted in the efforts one makes to decorate one's chapel well, and then one abandons the Holy Virgins placed in our churches.

Believe me, my dear sisters, not everything that is special is in keeping with the religious spirit, even devotion. Let us love common devotions; if we can dispose of something, let it be in favor of the common altar. I count too much on your good will, my dear Sisters, not to be persuaded that you will understand my reasons, and that, the first time I have the pleasure of seeing you, I will be able to see that your devotion has taken on a more genuine thrust, and that it is manifested above all by the invitation of the most beautiful examples that I can ever offer you: those of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary.

No doubt, my dear Sisters, you hold in high esteem the great grace that the Good Lord has given us to be called to the great honor of adoring Him day and night. You understand more and more, therefore, with what respect you must present yourselves before His Holy Majesty. A few small rules that I am going to present to you may benefit your piety. I will add to them some customs that I wish to make common in all our houses, so that there may be more uniformity as our Holy Rule recommends.

The Sisters will bow respectfully when the holy name of Jesus is pronounced, as well as at the Gloria Patri and the Sanctus of the Te Deum.

The Office should be recited calmly, pausing at the median.

Never enter the church with an apron on, unless you are going to work. Nor should one enter the church without being properly dressed.

One must always have a veil, the sisters dressed in color will have a black one. The sacristan must use hers to arrange the altar during the day, on Sundays and feasts, and always when the Blessed Sacrament is exposed; she will then avoid passing in front of the altar.

Out of respect for the Blessed Sacrament, one should avoid speaking loudly near the church.

The adorers should not greet each other when the Blessed Sacrament is exposed. On ordinary days, the greeting they make to each other should be less profound than the greeting they make to the Blessed Sacrament.

On fait au chœur le salut religieux et non des révérences.

It is always the person who replaces the adorers at adoration who must begin the Vivat.

Adoration should be done in the place intended for the adorer from half past five in the morning until half past eight in the evening, and all the sisters who come to adoration should be dressed in the religious habit and red mantle.

When the Salve Regina of the Rule is sung, the Sisters will remain standing during the antiphon and until the end of the "Let us Pray".

The morning and evening devotional reading will begin with a few articles from the Rule.

After the morning prayer, we will do the meditation, beginning with the prayer: My God I believe etc. It will end with the Sub Tuum.

The sisters reflect on the point of meditation in the evening while going to bed and recall it in the morning while getting dressed. It is also strongly recommended that they apply themselves to the particular exam during the silence that follows one of the two readings.

During the rosary, it is customary to sit at the beginning of the second decade until the end of the fourth. At the end of the last decade, devotion to the Sacred Hearts will follow.

There will always be a calendar of the Congregation in the common room and the sisters will not neglect to consult it to know what office is being held in the church.

In accordance with the desire expressed by the Good Father in his circular letter, it seems appropriate to read the excerpt from the Rule of St. Benedict in the **Four Times** of each year.

As far as possible, the bell should be rung five minutes before the prescribed time to begin each exercise.

No Sister will get up before the designated time without permission; nor will one get dressed before the signal to get up is given, and never in bed.

In asking permission to be absent, the sisters will maintain the practice of the Good Mother's time to say where they are going.

It is strongly recommended that the sisters do not put their bonnets back, but on the contrary, to style their hair modestly. They should also be careful to lower their veils a little below the lining of the cap.

The Sisters in charge of the linen and clothing will never destroy them without consultation of the Mother Superior or the Treasurer for examination.

Gifts to parents will never be anything more than objects of piety and of little value.

We note with sorrow that the **Article on Proclamations** is not being practiced. Let us remember, my dear Sisters, that we are all interested in seeing the Rule practiced. Let us take all the necessary means to maintain it. The Rule is the guardian of the vows, on its practice depends the advancement in religious virtues and the preservation of communities.

This last recommendation leads me quite naturally, my dear Sisters, to say a word to you about the virtue of humility, so difficult to practice and yet so necessary. Isn't it the lack of humility that causes all the little sorrows you sometimes complain about and creates the difficulties you have with one another? Humility well understood and well-practiced would make a religious community a heaven. I therefore urge you, my dear Sisters, to perfection. May your particular examination destroy your self-love, attachment to your way of seeing things, and establish you firmly in the practice of true humility of mind and heart. Be perfectly indifferent to the responsibilities which may be entrusted to you; but if you should have a preference, remember that it should be only for the responsibilities which are lowest in the eyes of men, remembering that these are the ones which bring you closest to the examples of the Divine Savior. Those who are employed in the classes should be happy to be placed among poor children, and will always prefer, out of a sense of humility, the lowest classes to the superior ones. It would indeed be disgraceful if, in a religious community, people would prefer to give preference to what is esteemed by men, and to prefer the more significant houses to those that are less so.

All such reflection, and everything that accompanies it, is entirely opposed to the maxims of the Gospel, and to the examples of the Divine Savior, whose life, from the stable to Calvary, was but one long example of detachment from all things, and of the deepest humility. I leave you in the presence of this divine model, my

dear Sisters, committing you once again to study him with the greatest devotion. You have already done so, thank God, and in conclusion, I wish to do justice to your good and excellent dispositions; they have only increased in the holy exercises of your recent retreat. You have asked yourselves, like Saint Bernard, what you have come here to do, and you have answered that you have come to religion to make grace triumph over nature; you have come here to deny yourselves, to take up your cross and follow Jesus Christ.

Courage therefore, my dearest good sisters, do not cease to fight nature whose demands are so dearly paid for, and you will taste more and more the sweetness promised to souls truly detached from themselves and from everything. You will see by experience that the yoke of the Lord is sweet and His burden is light.

I am sending you a copy of the inscription placed on the tomb of our Good Mother. "Let us always show ourselves worthy daughters of the one whom Divine Providence chose to be our foundress, mother and model; let us pray to her to obtain for us from the Divine Heart of Jesus, through the Immaculate Heart of Mary, the grace to be faithful to our sublime vocation and to fulfill all its duties."

I embrace you with the most tender affection, my dearest sisters, assuring you of your sincere interest in the love of the Divine Hearts.

Your very dedicated
Sister Gabrielle Aymer

P.S. You are advised, my dear Sisters, that with this letter I am cancelling all the permissions I might have given previously.