

THE PRECAUTIONS

Instruction and precautions necessary for anyone desiring to be a true religious and reach perfection.

1. The soul must practice the following instructions if it wishes to attain in a short time holy recollection and spiritual silence, nakedness, and poverty of spirit, where one enjoys the peaceful comfort of the Holy Spirit, reaches union with God, is freed of all the obstacles incurred from the creatures of this world, defended against the wiles and deceptions of the devil, and liberated from one's own self.

2. It should be noted, then, that all the harm the soul receives is born of its enemies, mentioned above: the world, the devil, and the flesh. The world is the enemy least difficult to conquer; the devil is the hardest to understand; but the flesh is the most tenacious, and its attacks continue as long as the old self lasts.

3. To gain complete mastery over any of these three enemies, one must vanquish all three of them; and in the weakening of one, the other two are weakened also. When all three are overpowered, no further war remains for the soul.

Against the World

4. To free yourself from the harm the world can do you, you should practice three precautions.

The first precaution

5. The first is that you should have an equal love for and an equal forgetfulness of all persons, whether relatives or not, and withdraw your heart from relatives as much as from others, and in some ways even more for fear that flesh and blood might be quickened by the natural love that is ever alive among kin, and must always be mortified for the sake of spiritual perfection.

6. Regard all as strangers, and you will fulfill your duty toward them better than by giving them the affection you owe God. Do not love one person more than another, for you will err;^[1] the person who loves God more is the one more worthy of love, and you do not know who this is. But forgetting everyone alike, as is necessary for holy recollection, you will free yourself from this error of loving one person more or less than another.

Do not think about others, neither good things nor bad. Flee them inasmuch as possible. And if you do not observe this practice, you will not know how to be a religious, nor will you be able to reach holy recollection or deliver yourself from imperfections. And if you should wish to allow yourself some freedom in this matter, the devil will deceive you in one way or another, or you will deceive yourself under some guise of good or evil.

In doing what we said, you will have security, for in no other way will you be capable of freeing yourself from the imperfections and harm derived from creatures.

The second precaution

7. The second precaution against the world concerns temporal goods. To free yourself truly of the harm stemming from this kind of good and to moderate the excess of your appetite, you should abhor all manner of possessions and not allow yourself to worry about these goods, neither for food, nor for clothing, nor for any other created thing, nor for tomorrow, and direct this care to something higher - to seeking the kingdom of God (seeking not to fail God); and the rest, as His Majesty says, will be added unto us [Mt. 6:33], for he who looks after the beasts will not be forgetful of you. By this practice you will attain silence and peace in the senses.

The third precaution

8. The third precaution is very necessary so you may know how to guard yourself in the community against all harm that may arise in regard to the religious. Many, by not observing it, not only have lost the peace and good of their souls but have fallen and ordinarily continue to fall into many evils and sins.

It is that you very carefully guard yourself against thinking about what happens in the community, and even more against speaking of it, of anything in the past or present concerning a particular religious: nothing about his or her character or conduct or deeds no matter how serious any of this seems. Do not say anything under the color of zeal or of correcting a wrong, unless at the proper time to whomever by right you ought to tell. Never be scandalized or astonished at anything you happen to see or learn of, endeavoring to preserve your soul in forgetfulness of all that.

9. For, should you desire to pay heed to things, many will seem wrong, even were you to live among angels, because of your not understanding the substance of them. Take Lot's wife as an example: Because she was troubled at the destruction of the Sodomites and turned her head to watch what was happening, God punished her by converting her into a pillar of salt [Gn. 19:26]. You are thus to understand God's will: that even were you to live among devils you should not turn the head of your thoughts to their affairs, but forget these things entirely and strive to keep your soul occupied purely and entirely in God, and not let the thought of this thing or that hinder you from so doing.

And to achieve this, be convinced that in monasteries and communities there is never a lack of stumbling blocks, since there is never a lack of devils who seek to overthrow the saints; God permits this in order to prove and try religious.

And if you do not guard yourself, acting as though you were not in the house, you will not know how to be a religious no matter how much you do, nor will you attain holy denudation and recollection or free yourself of the harm arising from these thoughts. If you are not cautious in this manner, no matter how good your intention and zeal, the devil will catch you in one way or another. And you are already fully captive when you allow yourself distractions of this sort.

Recall what the Apostle St. James asserts: *If anyone thinks he is religious, not restraining the tongue, that one's religion is vain* [Jas. 1:26]. This applies as much to the interior as to the exterior tongue.

Against the Devil

10. The one who aspires to perfection should use three precautions to be delivered from the devil, one's second enemy. It should be noted that among the many wiles of the devil for deceiving spiritual persons, the most common is deceiving them under the appearance of good rather than of evil, for the devil already knows that they will scarcely choose a recognized evil. Thus you should always be suspicious of what appears good, especially when not obliged by obedience. To do the right thing, and be safe in such a matter, you ought to take the proper counsel.

The first precaution

11. Let, then, the first precaution be that, without the command of obedience, you never take upon yourself any work - apart from the obligations of your state - however good and full of charity it may seem, whether for yourself or for anyone else inside or outside the house. By such a practice you will win merit and security, avoid possession, and flee from harm and evils unknown to you, for God will one day demand an account. If you do not observe this precaution in little things as well as big, you will be unable to avoid the devil's deceiving you to a small or great degree, no matter how right you think you are.

Even if your negligence amounts to no more than not being governed by obedience in all things, you culpably err, since God wants obedience more than sacrifice [1 Sm. 15:22]. The actions of religious are not their own, but belong to obedience, and if you withdraw them from obedience, you will have to count them as lost.

The second precaution

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

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

If you do not strive, with respect to your personal feelings, to be unconcerned about whether this one or another be superior, you will by no means be a spiritual person, nor will you keep your vows well.[\[2\]](#)

The third precaution

13. The third precaution, directly against the devil, is that you ever seek with all your heart to humble yourself in word and in deed, rejoicing in the good of others as if it were your own, desiring that they be given precedence over you in all things; and this you should do wholeheartedly. You will thereby overcome evil with good [Rom. 12:21], banish the devil, and possess a happy heart. Try to practice this more with those who least attract you. Realize that if you do not train yourself in this way, you will not attain real charity or make any progress in it.

And ever prefer to be taught by all rather than desire to teach even the least of all.

Against Oneself and the Shrewdness of Sensuality

14. The other three precautions to be practiced in the wish to conquer one's own self and sensuality, the third enemy.

The first precaution

15. The first precaution is to understand that you have come to the monastery so that all may fashion you and try you. Thus, to free yourself from the imperfections and disturbances that can be engendered by the mannerisms and attitudes of the religious and draw profit from every occurrence, you should think that all in the community are artisans - as indeed they are - present there in order to prove you; that some will fashion you with words, others by deeds, and others with thoughts against you; and that in all this you must be submissive as is the statue to the craftsman who molds it, to the artist who paints it, and to the gilder who embellishes it.

If you fail to observe this precaution, you will not know how to overcome your sensuality and feelings, nor will you get along well in the community with the religious or attain holy peace or free yourself from many stumbling blocks and evils.

The second precaution

16. The second precaution is that you should never give up your works because of a want of satisfaction and delight in them, if they are fitting for the service of God. Neither should you carry out these works merely because of the satisfaction or delight they accord you, but you should do them just as you would the disagreeable ones. Otherwise it will be impossible for you to gain constancy and conquer your weakness.

The third precaution

17. The third precaution is that the interior person should never set eyes on the pleasant feelings found in spiritual exercises, becoming attached to them and carrying out these practices only for the sake of this satisfaction. Nor should such a person run from the bitterness that may be found in them, but rather seek the arduous and distasteful and embrace it. By this practice, sensuality is held in check; without this practice you will never lose self-love or gain the love of God.

[1] Though this seems inhuman and contradictory to the way John behaved toward his own mother and brother, the tone finds its roots in the Gospel (Lk. 14:26). Love must not be based on temporal goods, such as blood, status, or titles ([A. 3. 18-20](#)); nor on natural goods: beauty, intelligence, and so on ([A. 3. 21-23](#)).

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