

1919

Retreat after the war, in the house of the Priests of the Sacred Heart, 28 April - 3 May, 1919

(1) In four years of war, passed in the midst of a world in agony, how good the Lord has been to me! He has enabled me to go through so much, and granted me so many occasions of doing good to my fellow men! My Jesus, I thank you and I bless you. I call to mind all those young souls I have come to know during these years, many of whom I accompanied to the threshold of the other life; the memory of them moves me deeply, and the thought that they will pray for me is comforting and encouraging.

(2) While we are all re-awakening as if to the light of a new day, those supreme principles of faith and Christian and priestly life which by the grace of God were the nourishment of my youth are once more clear to me and now seem even brighter and firmer than before: the glory of God, the sanctification of my soul, paradise, the Church, the souls of men. The contacts with the world during these four years have transformed these principles into action, ennobled them and imbued them with a more burning apostolic zeal. I am now of mature years: either I achieve something positive, or I bear a terrible responsibility for having wasted the Lord's mercies.

(3) As the foundation of my apostolate I want an inner life spent in the search for God in myself and for close union with him, and in the habitual and tranquil meditation on the truths which the Church teaches me, a meditation which, according to the teaching of the Church, shall be expressed in religious practices which will become more and more dear to me. In the observance of these I want to be absolutely faithful, more than I have been during these years of military life, partly because of my own negligence and partly because of the impossibility of doing all I would.

Above all I will seek the joys of living with Jesus in the Holy Eucharist. From now on I shall have the Blessed Sacrament near my own rooms. I promise to keep Jesus company and to be worthy of this great honour.

(4) It is now some months since I set up my own home and furnished it in a suitable manner. Nevertheless, perhaps now more than ever before, the Lord gives me to understand the beauty and the sweetness of the spirit of poverty. I feel I would be willing to give it all up here and now, and without regrets. I shall always try, as long as I live, to keep this feeling of detachment from all that is mine, even from what is dearest to me.

I pledge myself especially to seek perfect poverty of spirit in absolute detachment from myself, never feeling any anxiety about positions, career, distinctions or anything else. Am I not already too much honoured in the sublime simplicity of my priesthood and in the work I am doing now, not sought by me but entrusted to me by Providence, by the voice of my Superiors?

I dwell at length on this matter because it is fundamental for my well I will never say or do anything, I will dismiss as a temptation any thought, which

might in any way be directed to persuading ill), Superiors to give me positions or duties of greater distinction. Experience teaches me to beware of responsibilities. These are solemn enough in themselves if assumed under obedience, but terrifying for whoever has sought them for himself, pushing himself forward without being called upon. I honours and distinctions, even in the ecclesiastical world, are 'vanity of vanities'.

They assert the glory of a day; they are dangerous for whoever desires glory in eternity and paradise; even from the point of view of human wisdom they are worth very little. Anyone who has lived in the midst of these stupidities as I did in Rome, and in the first ten years of my priesthood, may well insist that they deserve no better name. Forward, forward, whoever wants to go ahead ! I envy none of these fortunate souls. 'It is good for me to be near God, and to place my hope in the Lord God.'

(5) During these last years there have been days when I wondered what God would require of me after the war. Now there is no more cause for uncertainty, or for looking for something else; my main task is here, and here is my burden, the apostolate among students.' When I reflect on the manner, the circumstances and tire spontaneity with which this plan of God's Providence, through the medium of my Superiors, suddenly took shape and is now evolving, my heart is touched and I feel bound to confess that truly the Lord is here. So often, in the evening, when I turn over in my mind the events of the day spent in looking after my dear students, I feel in me something of the awe which fell upon those two disciples on the way to Emmaus, as if in contact with the divine.

How true it is that if one entrusts oneself wholly to the Lord, one is provided with everything needful! 'Having nothing' yet "possessing all things" comes true every day under my eyes. I do not want to contract debts, and I have none. I am always at a loss to provide for the future, but I always receive what I need and sometimes more.

This proof of divine assistance consoles me in my poverty, but it also constitutes another bond of honour to hold me true to my vocation and to co-operate 'until the end' in the great work which Jesus has entrusted to me for his beloved young men.

All my cares, thoughts, affections, labours, studies, humiliations, grids all must now be offered for this object only, that is for the glory of Jesus, through the formation of the new generation in his spirit. Nothing could be finer and more honourable for me than this, nothing more important, especially at this time, in the whole Church of God.

(6) To succeed in my apostolate I will recognize no other school than that of the divine Heart of Jesus. "Learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart". Experience also has confirmed the supreme wisdom of this method, which brings real success.

I shall love my young students as a mother her sons, but always in the Lord and with the intention of bringing them up as worthy sons of the Church and, if I can, as future generous apostles of truth and goodness -and at the same

time I shall be cherishing in them the best hopes of our families and of our country.

I shall be particularly careful always to maintain in my house a fragrant atmosphere of purity which may influence my young men and make such a profound impression on them that it will survive in later years, even in the future conflicts of their lives. Nothing affected or superficial, but ill simplicity of manners and speech the indefinable quality that made the saintly teachers of old and of our own times seem to live in an atmosphere of heaven, and enabled them to do so much good and be true builders of great souls. Lord, help the to follow, if only from afar and in my humble way, these shining examples of great teachers of the young.

(7) The work I have set my hand to is enormous; the corn is already golden in the fields, but alas! the reapers are few. I will try, with prayers to God and my own endeavours, to 'Inspire in young clerics and priests a love and enthusiasm for this form of ministry which excels all others. I will try to make it attractive, especially to those to whom nature and grace have granted a special aptitude for working with the young. Who knows but that the right word and still more a good example may succeed, and I may soon find myself surrounded with a fine circle of brothers, all eager for the apostolate among young people? I shall do all I can to get the Priests of the Sacred Heart to take up thus order of ideals and works. The Congregation was instituted chiefly for this purpose and one must try to increase its numbers, for it was intended that it should permeate the whole diocese of Bergamo with its spirit of apostolic work and ecclesiastical discipline.