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THE EVANGELICAL MAXIMS

[REFLECTIONS ON CHAPTER II OF THE COMMON RULES]

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The missionary "will choose even death rather than be separated from the charity of Christ... and as long as he remains rooted in this charity... he will always remain under the protection of the God of heaven" (CR II, 2). With these words, the *Common Rules* outline the missionary's inner identity. It is marked by an affectionate and radical belonging to the charity of Christ through an "election"—that is, an act of self-surrender to the Lord in freedom. However, when we use words like "charity" and "love," we face "worn-out and uncontrolled words, a kind of sieve that leaks everywhere" (Von Balthasar). Yet, within the constellation of meanings—tenderness, affection, bond, dedication—that characterize these two words lies the decisive experience of human existence. "To love" and "to feel loved" are, in fact, the warp and weft of the fabric of life, whose generative principle is the event of Christ assimilated to the point of feeling the impossibility of separating from Him (cf. Rom 8:29; Gal 2:20). Upon this existential sentiment are founded all the behaviors suggested by the second chapter of the *Common Rules*. From it arise the virtuous actions it proposes, preventing them from becoming mere formal and lifeless acts. It is to this sentiment that one must return at every crossroad of missionary life when the path becomes dark and complicated. It must be felt bubbling up like fresh water in the depths of prayer. Outside of it, there is boredom, routine, distraction, and emptiness. This is the radical stance of the missionary: "to prefer death rather than be separated from the love of Jesus." And as long as one remains united to this love, nothing can disturb them.

As a corollary of this belonging, there is the need to "make familiar—in our consciousness—the fulfillment of the entire will of God." This means serenely and docilely surrendering to "everything that may unexpectedly happen to us, taking it from the paternal hand of God" (CR II, 3). Abandoning oneself to the fatherhood of God, who guides our life, is one of the key themes characterizing the identity of a missionary because it stems directly from following Christ, "who always acted in this way and with this purpose, doing what was pleasing to the Father" (CR II, 3). It is not easy to "let ourselves be led" when everything around us suggests that we must act, engage, and build. "Letting ourselves be led" seems like an intolerable passivity to the lazy man. But adherence to God's designs for our lives is nothing of the sort. Rather, it is acting in harmony with the Mystery of God, who does all things, allowing Him to guide our history in a kind of "passive activity"—which involves the free energy of a will that does not seek to take ownership of life. In this way, a missionary can fully embrace life, experiencing the vitality of a continuous rebirth both for themselves and for the world.

But how can we develop this familiarity with God's will? By following the directions that the virtues of the Vincentian spirit imprint upon the soul—especially simplicity and humility. "It shall be for us a sacred and inviolable rule… to think and judge things according to the thoughts and judgment of Christ, never of the world; and never according to the weak reasoning of our intellect" (CR II, 5). This way of facing life's events and relating to others implies, on one hand, prudent simplicity—that is, the authenticity of our disposition oriented toward Christ; and on the other hand, being, according to His model, humble, meek, and mortified. These virtues have humility as their foundation and missionary zeal as their peak. Humility cannot be superficial because there is no humility without suffering humiliations. Rather, humility is a descent into self-abasement through three steps: "Sincerely considering oneself worthy of the contempt of men; rejoicing when others recognize our defects; hiding our achievements as much as possible, and when that is not possible, attributing them to others or to God. This is the foundation of all evangelical perfection and the axis of all spiritual life" (CR II, 7). This is how God reigns in a missionary, and it is through this means that the principles of the Gospel radiate from their personality.

However, the spirit of evil will do everything possible to distract the missionary from Christ's lordship in their heart through five temptations: "1st, the prudence of the flesh; 2nd, vanity before men;

3rd, the desire for others to always submit to our judgment and will; 4th, the pursuit of natural satisfaction in all things; 5th, insensitivity to the honor of God and the salvation of others" (CR II, 15). The victory against these temptations lies, beyond personal asceticism, in "helping one another as members of the same mystical body" (CR II, 17). Such mutual support implies certain constructive attitudes of fraternal charity, whose principal acts are: "granting and approving everything in the Lord; bearing with one another without murmuring, and honoring one another ahead of ourselves" (CR II, 12). Thus, fraternal charity becomes the seal of a practice of the evangelical maxims that is concrete, sincere, and effective.

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