234. Ways of cultivating vocations and preserving the spirit of piety

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My dear sons in Jesus Christ,

Having completed my visit to our Houses, I feel the need to spend some time with you, my dear sons, on matters that could be for the greater glory of God and to the advantage of our Congregation.

Before anything else I am happy to be able to reassure you that I have been very happy with the material and moral progress, both in what refers to internal administration and in our external social relationships. There is work being done, the Constitutions of the Society are observed, discipline is being maintained, people are frequenting the holy Sacraments, the spirit of piety is being fostered and vocations cultivated amongst those with the good fortune to show signs of being called to the ecclesiastical state. Thanks be to God for all this. It is to his goodness and mercy that we owe the little good we are achieving amongst us.

I also have the consolation of sharing with you how our Society is growing day by day. The year just finished a number of new houses were opened; others will be opened this year, 1876. Personnel is growing in number and in approach, but as soon as someone becomes suitable to take up a responsibility, Divine Providence immediately presents an opportunity to put him to work.

What can we say of the requests to open houses in so many places? In many cities in Italy, France, England; in North, Central and South America and especially in the Empire of Brazil and in the Argentine Republic; in Algeria, Africa, Egypt, in Palestine, India, Japan, China, Australia there are millions and millions of reasonable beings still buried in the darkness of error, but from the brink of perdition they raise their voices and cry: “Lord, send us workers of the Gospel who can come and bring us the light of truth and point out the only way that can lead to salvation.” A few of our confreres, as you well know, have already given ear to these moving voices and have left for the Argentine Republic, where they have gone amongst the savage tribes of Patagonia; but in all the letters written on their journey and from their places of mission the same voice resounds: “Send us workers.” Amongst other things they note how the Archdiocese of Rio Janeiro, Brazil, has two million inhabitants with very few priests and just five seminarians in the seminary.

My dear sons, I am distressed when I reflect on the abundant harvest that presents itself at any time and anywhere, and that we have to leave unharvested because of lack of workers. However let us not lose courage, and for now apply ourselves seriously to work and with prayer and virtue prepare a new army for Jesus Christ. We will achieve this especially by cultivating religious vocations; and if needs be in time we will even offer ourselves for those sacrifices that God deigns to ask of us for our salvation and that of others. Meanwhile, in the desire to come to matters which will be helpful in cultivating religious vocations and be effective for preserving the spirit of piety amongst Salesians and the boys entrusted to us, I am recommending some things that experience has taught me as being very necessary.

1. In every House, and especially in the Oratory of St Francis de Sales, let each one take great care to foster small groups such as the Altar Servers, Sodalities of the Blessed Sacrament, St Aloysius, Mary Help of Christians and the Immaculate Conception. Let no one be afraid of speaking about them, recommending them, encouraging them and pointing out their purpose, origin, and the indulgences and the other advantages that can be gained. I believe that these groups called be called the key to piety, preserver of morals, support of ecclesiastical and religious vocations.

2. Be careful of relationships, friendships or ordinary or particular conversations whether in writing, talking, through books or gifts of any kind. Taking someone's hand, caresses on the face, kisses, walking arm in arm or with your arms around someone else's neck are all strictly prohibited, not only amongst yourselves and yourselves and your pupils, I say, but including amongst the pupils themselves. Let's keep our thoughts firmly fixed on what St Jerome says: “affection for no one or equal affection for everyone”.

3. Keep away from the world and its maxims. The root of sorrows and disorder are our relationships with the world we have abandoned and which wants to attract us back to it again. Many who seemed to be models of virtue while living in the religious house, once they went elsewhere, with family or friends, soon lost their good will and after returning to the Order could no longer recover [their former stance], and some have even gone as far as losing their vocation. Therefore never go back to the family except for serious reasons and when there are serious reasons never go without due permission and, as far as is possible, accompanied by a confrere chosen by the superior. Taking on commissions, recommendations, business affairs, buying or selling for others are things to be constantly avoided because they can be ruinous for vocations and morality.

4. In the evening after prayers, let each one retire immediately for rest. Stopping to take a walk, chat or finish work, is dangerous for spiritual and also bodily health. I know that in some places, thanks be to God not in our houses, they were forced to lament painful abuses and when they sought the reason for them, they were found to be conversations begun or continued at the time we are talking about.

Punctuality in taking rest is tied in with getting up promptly in the mornings, something I equally insist on. Believe it, my dear sons, fatal experience tells us that spending longer in bed in the mornings without need for it was always found to be a very dangerous thing. On the other hand getting up promptly, as well as being the principle for having a good day, could also be called an ongoing good example for everyone. In this regard I could not fail to warmly recommend that Superiors act in such a way that everyone, especially Coadjutors and service personnel, are given time to be at holy Mass every morning, the opportunity to receive holy Communion frequently and go to the Sacrament of Penance regularly, according to our Constitutions.

This letter that I am addressing to everyone in general I would like you to consider also as written for each of you in particular, and that its every word be spoken, repeated a thousand times in everyone's hearing, so it will never be forgotten.

But I hope, out of the affection you have for me, and for the commitment you show to your duties, especially by putting into practice the advice of your father and spiritual friend, you will give me the great consolation of not only being faithful to these recommendations, but even more will interpret them in ways that can best contribute to the greater glory of God and of our Congregation.

And with such persuasion I ask God to bless you all and grant you good health and the precious gift of perseverance in doing good. And finally, pray for me. I remain yours always, in Jesus Christ our Lord,

Your affectionate friend,

Fr John Bosco