

The Gift of Self ¹

St. Peter Julian Eymard to the Servants of the Blessed Sacrament
Paris, Friday, July 26, 1861

My Sisters, we finished the first chapter of the Rule; now we go to the second. However, to catch the real secret of the Rule, **to enter into the grace of your vocation, into its perfection, you must not forget that everything depends on only one thing – the gift of yourselves, a complete gift to the service of love of our Lord in the most Blessed Sacrament.**

Giving is a good thing – it means making a donation, a gift. It involves returning what we have received; but this is not the same as giving oneself. Our Lord requires giving as a condition for evangelical service: *Go, sell what you have and give to the poor, then come, follow me; and you will have treasure in heaven* (cf. Mt 19:21). Abandon everything, come, give yourself in your poverty as my follower, and I will give you everything. Our Lord says that this is a big sacrifice, for he adds: *Everyone who has given up houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands for the sake of my name will receive a hundred times more, and will inherit eternal life* (cf. Mt 19:29). Our Lord says that this is costly: our poor nature wants to provide for itself; we always want to have something in reserve, out of fear of misfortune. That is the first step, and we will receive a hundredfold. The proof is that our Lord does not want to wait till the next world to reward us. We left one house, and we gain a hundred others; we left one father and mother, and we find even more dedicated and gentle ones in the spiritual order. It seems that we lose everything and we gain everything.

What must we do? **Love has no conditions:** when we start placing conditions, love is no longer perfect. For God, what is essential is that we keep nothing for ourselves; unless we do that, we will not adore God with our whole mind, our whole heart, and all our strength. The Good Lord is so good that, in the law, he places two things: commandment and counsel. We do more than people who keep only the commandments; we keep some of the counsels. But, I must say that we cannot fly – the feathers in our wings are still bound; we cannot enjoy God as yet. Our Lord wanted to give himself completely to us in the perfection of his love, but he requires the gift of ourselves, in order to fill us completely.

Now, what is this gift of self? It is a contract by which we give ourselves purely and simply, perpetually, without any condition, without any self-interest, without any other reward than that of serving our Lord and being pleasing to him. The gift of self out of love has no parallel on earth; nothing can compare with it.

For example, a house-helper gives his freedom for a year – he gives his hands and his work, but he keeps his own thoughts. He can resign any time; he gives, yes, but it is the gift of one who works for pay. There is also the marriage covenant between a man and a woman: this is a more intimate gift; in itself it is more perfect. It is a perpetual bond, a sharing of goods; however, since death can separate them, we ordinarily say that one inherits from the other, that one mourns the other, *but then becomes free to marry* (cf. 1 Cor 7:39), as St. Paul says. This sharing of goods and of money is perfect in one sense, and very imperfect in another – it is more to enjoy life than to sacrifice it. Filial piety is more perfect: a child serves his parents; but as the child grows, so does self-love – the thought comes: I will inherit from my father and mother. Every time there is self-interest, love is not perfect. This does not mean that we should not desire the kingdom of heaven... but with a more perfect love.

¹ Number 355. *Le don de soi. Explication de la règle. (Explanation of the Rule)*

This religious gift is perfect love: there is none more perfect on earth and in heaven. The gift of self on earth has greater freedom; in heaven, it is a gift of the necessity of love, since the soul goes to God out of a necessity of joy. Here on earth, it is not that way: the gift of self is a sacrifice; it is the most glorious and most noble act that we could do – to give oneself completely to God. If this gift is perpetual, for example through vows, then we call the person a consecrated person – she belongs to God. This is much greater than the other unions where the persons keep their freedom; here, it is a sacrifice.

Do you know that it is very difficult to give one's mind, one's way of seeing things, of thinking and of judging? To see, to think and to judge only according to the mind of our Lord, in the spirit of obedience and humility, is the most difficult thing for most human beings. We hold on to our minds more than to material belongings. Yet this is what we must give. To give our heart is even greater still. I'm not talking about wayward affections for creatures, for these are easily interchangeable and the heart will lose nothing. But to surrender one's attachment to oneself so as to love oneself only in God... Such a gift will often fluctuate, for the heart tends to take itself back. That gift must be constantly renewed. The gift of the will can be called the sacrificial holocaust. Our very humanity consists of heart and will. By the vow of obedience we give ourselves forever without hope of reward. I imagine that our Lord must be pleased with such a gift.

If we stopped there, the gift would be very incomplete. Human nature caters first to the body rather than the soul. My good Daughters, see how easily we make the sacrifice of our mind; we often do it to avoid offending a guardian or master; we renounce it out of self-interest, and even simply to be polite. The heart follows by detaching itself from everything; so does the will. Merely to follow the example of worldly persons – would be embarrassing for us. They serve a human master with greater devotion [than we serve God], I say even more, with passionate devotion, lowering themselves at his feet. How humiliating for a person who should love the Good Lord.

My Sisters, **the gift of the body is greater than that of the soul.** This is not the first time that I tell you this; make no mistake: it is harder to give one's body than one's soul. It is more difficult to break small habits, to sacrifice little things, than to make the biggest spiritual sacrifices. Experience proves this: people reject religious life, because of a change of diet that would do them much good. They even hesitate for the following reasons: What is your resting time, what kind of food do you eat? I see this every day. When I see that someone begins by thinking about his body, I say: Here is someone coming for himself. This really happens! When the soul is happy, the body will follow. This makes me the saddest – One day, a priest was asking me the most detailed questions: what was our diet, our food, did we eat meat? I could not believe my ears! – My response was absolutely negative; I did not want him at any price.

It seems that **the gift of one's diet,** accepting a common diet, is an extraordinary mortification for many. Why? We are more earthly than spiritual. We are slaves to our body. What we admire in penitents is that they live on the simplest of diets. Why? In order to spiritualize their body, they gave it only what it needs so as not to die. God performed miracles; giving them health and longevity that were beyond explanation. There were some hermits who lived on inadequate food, hardly eating anything, performing surprising lacerations; yet it seems that God enjoyed giving them good health. They deprived themselves of everything and God gave them good health. Is it nothing to give one's health to God, to serve him without preoccupation for one's health? If you have reached that point, if I were Pope, I would canonize you while you are still alive. There's nothing greater that you could do. Nevertheless, we must reach that point of not worrying about our health. The saints did it.

I am not saying that when we are sick we must not take care of ourselves. But, we are cured as the Good Lord wants, as obedience wants, not as we will. Perhaps you have not experienced this, but certainly, of all the virtues and of all the mortifications, this is the one that crowns them all, to give one's health. Such

a person is perfect and will be well rewarded. This is proof that she is dead to herself. Don't we feel anything? Of course, very intensely and painfully, but the love of God is stronger. We must give our health.

The gift of one's life, if only we knew how long it will last: by following a diet, by taking care of my body, I can live one year, ten years longer by taking good care of myself. As things are I might die one year, four or five years sooner. Although I am not obliged to do so in justice, I will take the latter part, not only I do nothing wrong, but it is better, and most people do it. A merchant says: I see clearly that my health is diminishing, but I can still work for one year to increase my fortune, or to guarantee food for my children; later I will not be able any more – I must continue. A soldier may be asked: Where are you going? – I am going to fight: it is my duty. – He will give his life, often at the whim of some ruler, and never refusing. How many people risk their life for various [selfish] motives!

I was telling someone: You spend the night in the ballroom or in the theater – what if the Good Lord would ask you what the world is asking you, - don't you see that you are killing yourself? – I'm enjoying myself; I prefer to die rather than not enjoy myself. In the world they say: She is doing right, even if she is shortening her life by thirty or forty years. And for myself, could I not do for God as much as I would do for the world? The world is so generous to satisfy its passions; getting up at night is not good for our natural health; to live one year less, so what? Besides, the Good Lord does not punish us in that way; if you give him a few grams of health, he will return you a hundredfold. The Good Lord is not a tyrant; he does not find enjoyment in causing our death. He wants us to die to our passions, to our self-love, in order to make us live from his love. We must stress this, my poor Daughters. I hear people say: I really love the Good Lord; I give him my heart, my will, my thoughts. I don't press the point with them: they're not able to understand. They give what they can retract; they keep the best for themselves.

The devil knew this very well when he placed Job on a dunghill. Job had sacrificed his goods, his children. Even his friends came to insult him. The devil said: *Man gives everything to protect his body, his skin; hit him there and you will see if he is still patient—if he will bless you face to face* (cf. Jb 1:11). He attacked Job from head to foot, and placed him on a dunghill – worse than a dunghill since the worms were eating his flesh. Job bore this trial – there could not be any greater one – and God gave him a hundredfold.

My good Daughters, we renounce everything to come into religious life, but by nature we are greedy. We continue looking for everything that we liked, slowly and patiently, in a way that is not noticeable – we end up recovering everything that we lost. Be careful of this. We must sacrifice everything; we are on a battlefield – we must fight till the end, till the wound reaches our heart, like our Lord on the cross. Then all will go right.

When our human nature returns to its fears, its thoughts: What should I do, what will happen to me? – Are you still at that stage? Can't you see the work of the devil? Our human nature wants to drag us down. [...] God is the life of the body and of the soul; don't look back on what you have given. Let us examine ourselves constantly on this point; we are thieves, we constantly repeat our crimes, stealing from our sacrifices: we offer and then take back. How good Lord must be! This is why we must keep our gift of self ever before our eyes; we must nourish it, renew it – this is the Christian life, the religious life: *My son, give me your heart* (Pr 23:26). God seems to be repeating it: *You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind* (cf. Mt 22:37). The law excludes nothing at all.

That is the main concept of your entire Rule: the gift of yourself out of love, not out of self-interest. You must serve our Lord as he wills: you must serve him always, give yourself completely to him – the more you give, the more you will receive. Give everything, and our Lord will make it bear fruit a hundredfold. What you don't give will cause the rest to be lost: it is like a drop of water that can

eventually destroy an entire building, like money that has not been deposited and produces nothing. Only God can make your gift bear fruit.

- ❖ Cf. “Second Anniversary of the Foundation”, July 31, 1861: Booklet # 3, Section E.
- ❖ See also: “Advent”, December 10, 1861: Booklet # 1, Section B.

Point for reflection:

In your own words, summarize this teaching in writing, and make a link with the life of the Founder, with the Rule of Life, and with your own life.