

Chapter Four

VOTIS OMNIBUS VERBO ADHÆRERE

SUMMARY—Charity must be joined to Virginity, for Love is the Bond of Union—The Virgin must attach herself to the Spouse with all her Powers—This Attachment is realised by Fidelity—The importance of this Fidelity—The “Little Foxes” which ravage the Bridegroom’s Vineyard—The Blessings brought by Fidelity.

To become the spouse of Our Lord it is not sufficient to have only virginity of soul and body. Has not Our Lord Himself said that amongst the ten virgins, five were excluded from the nuptial ceremony? Yet they were virginal souls. What was wanting then? The oil necessary to keep their lamps burning.

According to the usual interpretation of the Fathers of the Church, oil here symbolises charity. Charity was wanting to the foolish virgins; it was the sole cause of their exclusion: an absolutely compelling reason, however. For is not charity, as a matter of fact, that which crowns all the other virtues and without which they are nothing worth? Listen to St. Paul: “If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal. And if I should have prophecy and should know all mysteries, and all knowledge and if I should have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity I am nothing. And if I should distribute all my goods to feed the poor, and if I should deliver my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing”: *nihil mihi prodest*.¹ If these extraordinary gifts, these eminent works are worth nothing devoid of charity, the same applies to virginity which is separated from love: excellent though it may be in itself, it is without value in the eyes of the Bridegroom and the door remains shut to it: “Amen, I know you not.” *Nescio vos*.²

Charity, love, is then absolutely essential for that soul who wishes to be admitted to the rank of spouse; it is the very bond of union. St. Bernard defines this love as “to adhere to the Word with all her power, to live for Him, to be ruled by Him.” Such are the necessary duties incumbent upon such an eminent dignity; but they are even more incumbent for those ascending degrees, which lead to more perfect and more fruitful union.³

To have the rank of spouse the soul ought “with all its strength to adhere to the Word.” *Votis omnibus Verbo adhærere*; it should be able to say truthfully with the Psalmist: “It is good for me to adhere to my God” *Mihi autem adhærere Deo bonum est*.⁴ If “man shall leave father and mother and shall cleave to his wife”, so the bride in the same manner attaches herself to her spouse. *Et adhærebit uxor suæ*.⁵

¹ I Cor 13:1-3

² Matt 25:12

³ “The immortal Bridegroom, for whom virginity prepares you, has two wonderful qualities. He is infinitely separated from all by the purity of His being; He is infinitely communicative by reason of His goodness. Christian virginity, then, consists in a holy separation and a chaste union. This separation constitutes its purity; the chaste and holy union is the cause of the spiritual delights which grace makes abound in the truly virginal soul.” Bossuet, *Sermon sur la Virginité. Œuvres oratoires*. Edit. Lebarq, t. IV, p. 473 and 475. All this wonderful sermon should be read. *Sermon for a Profession, Ibid.*, t. III, pp. 521 sq.

⁴ Ps 73(72):28

⁵ Gen 2:24; Matt 19:5

What is it to be united to the Spouse? It is to follow Him everywhere and always, to have the same thoughts, the same interests, to share the same labours, to be associated in the same destiny. One word completely sums up all these duties: fidelity.

St. Paul asseverates this truth, and the Church in the Pontifical for the consecration of virgins expresses several times the same thought.⁶

Does not this refer to some promise to be kept; some contract maintained? But what promise has the chaste soul of the religious made? That of the vows. That is why fidelity to vows is of such supreme importance in the life of a soul consecrated to God. Every transgression of these solemn promises hinders the life of union with the Spouse.

It is “with all our powers,” *voctis omnibus*, that we must by fidelity safeguard our “adhesion to the Word,” the Spouse of the soul.

This fidelity must be universal; with regard to the Spouse it must extend to all that relates to His person, His rights, His interests, and His glory; on the part of the soul it should touch all the faculties; ennoble every act for the whole of life. Nothing should escape this fidelity, nothing diminish or injure it. Free from every scruple, it must be constant in its fidelity. The soul must be united to the Beloved, not only during the hours of joy, but also during those hours of darkness when it seems as if abandoned by the Spouse, when in desolation “it seeks Him whom the soul loves and finds Him not.” *In lectulo meo per noctes quæsiui quem diligit anima mea et non inveni.*⁷ “It calls and He answers not.” *Vocavi et non respondit mihi.*⁸

This continuous and constant fidelity, even in the smallest things is of the greatest importance; the perfection and fruitfulness of the union are dependent upon it. This fidelity to the Spouse in the slightest details pleases the Word: he speaks of this in the Canticle: “Thou hast wounded my heart, my spouse with one hair of thy neck.” *In uno crine colli tui.*⁹

You know also that other text in the Canticle: “Catch us the little foxes that destroy the vines: for our vineyard hath flourished.” *Capite nobis vulpes parvulas quæ demoliuntur vineas; nam vinea nostra fluorit.*¹⁰ These are the words of the spouse, who, full of love, thinks of the dangers which menace the vine planted by the Beloved, and committed to her care. The spouse is troubled about “the little foxes”; they are *parvuli*, that is scarcely to be seen; but the spouse knows that they ravage the vineyard; but as the interests of the Bridegroom are hers, she speaks of “our vineyard,” and is it surprising that she should be preoccupied about them?

What is this vine, and what are these noxious little beasts? The vine is the soul itself, the consecrated soul; Our Lord has planted it, or rather, “we are the branches” of that divine vine which is “He Himself.” *Ego sum vitis, vos palmites.*¹¹ Chosen branches, has He not loved you with a love of preference? Are you not chosen “before many others”: *præ consortibus tuis*,¹² to be called to intimate union with Him? It is in speaking of you that God could say: “Here is the vine

⁶ *Si [Christo] fideliter servieris, in perpetuum coroneris; propositum teneas; fidem integram, fidelitatemque sinceram teneat, etc.*

⁷ Sg 3:1

⁸ *Ibid.*, 5:6

⁹ *Ibid.*, 4:9

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 2:5

¹¹ John 15:5

¹² Ps 45(44):8

of my love.” *Vinea electa*:¹³ “I have acquired it with my blood, I have surrounded it with a wall to protect it, I have placed it close to the well of living water, to fructify the earth which bears it” — the Sacraments, those unfailing founts of light and grace. “What is there that I ought to do more to my vineyard, that I have not done to it?” *Quid est quod debui ultra facere vineæ et non feci ei...?*¹⁴

Consequently from this vine, cultivated with so much care, Christ justly demands a rich harvest: “In this is my Father glorified that you bring forth much fruit.” *In hoc clarificatus est Pater meus ut fructum plurimum afferatis.*¹⁵

The unique preoccupation of Jesus is the glory of His Father; and He has a right to expect of the souls whom He has chosen to be His spouses, that they shall also be enkindled with zeal for the glory of the Father; in consequence, rich in good works and fruits of sanctity.

But how is it that souls so privileged as these, the objects of such delicate attention, vegetate, as it were, and do not arrive at that high degree of intimate union with the Spouse, that should render them fruitful? What is it that hinders the vine from bearing that abundance of fruit which would delight the heart of the Spouse? These ravages are caused by the *vulpes parvulas*. These foxes are small, not in their cunning and the harm they do, but only in appearance; in reality, their ravages are great, and the attentive husbandman fears them. What do these animals signify, which ravage the vine when it is in flower, and prevent it bearing fruits for the well-beloved?

Are these imperfections of body or soul? No, all the Saints have known these faults and frailties; all have experienced the weight of the body, the strife against the spirit, tendencies of fallen nature, the effects of sin, of heredity, of temperament, of education. The Bridegroom desired to unite to a soul that was feeble, that stumbled, that failed by surprise, because He is Infinite Mercy and Love, and because, far from these faults separating us from Him, our helplessness and our misery attract Him. It is that He has come to cure.

Still, nothing is more certain than that Our Lord will never give Himself intimately to an unfaithful soul. It is these infidelities which ravage the vineyard. These faults can be, and usually are, “small “ (*parvulæ*) but they are to be feared when they are either habitual or deliberate. To admit carelessness in exercises of piety, break the silence without necessity, disobey willingly and without concern the smallest point of the Rule, take no notice of established usages, even small and trivial ones, under pretext of largeness of view, waste time futilely, linger over imprudent thoughts, be knowingly lacking in charity, criticise orders or actions of superiors: all such acts impair fidelity, and enfeeble the life of union. If these infidelities, often repeated and renewed, become habitual what may happen? Then the graces given in abundance profit but little, the intimacy of the soul with Christ diminishes, the action of the Holy Spirit becomes less, progress is practically at a standstill, and the interior life gravely compromised. Moreover, how can the intimacy with Our Lord be enjoyed, the effects of His love be experienced, if love for Him is lacking the whole day through? The virgin who constantly and regularly does not close the entrance of the vineyard to these “little foxes “ is not a true spouse, for these infidelities deeply wound our Lord. Surely, to such a soul can be applied the words of God lamenting over the children of Israel, which He compares to a vine carefully cultivated by Him but which has not re-

¹³ Cf. Is 5:2

¹⁴ Is 5:4

¹⁵ Jn 15:8

sponded to the divine efforts: “I looked to my vineyard that it should bring forth grapes, and it hath brought forth wild grapes.” *Expectavi ut faceret uvas, et fecit labruscas.*¹⁶

Is it not also amongst those that are intimate that coldnesses are most felt, and that they rapidly assume the aspect of deliberate offence? The soul, then, that is dedicated to Christ must follow the Spouse, and serve Him with all attention and the strictest fidelity; this fidelity manifests itself especially in a constancy to avoid those little failings which could displease the Word.

Let us show, then, in safeguarding our fidelity, a great generosity. Fidelity of this sort costs, and will continue to cost nature much.

But did the Bridegroom shrink when His Father indicated to Him the cross as the means of redeeming our souls and paying for the jewels that should adorn them for all eternity? Can we then be united to such a Spouse and not be desirous of taking our share in abnegations and sufferings? All should be in common between the Spouse and His bride, and a soul which desires the joys of union without sharing the same life of denial and suffering is not worthy of such a high vocation. She closes for herself, in addition, the door to many graces, for fidelity is often the reason that moves God to bestow His graces. If many consecrated souls do not arrive at the degree of union to which the Spouse calls them, it is because they have constantly hindered in themselves the action of His Spirit.

If now we perceive in our life some infidelity which hinders us from giving ourselves entirely to the Word, let us take the resolution to put an end to it. Placing ourselves at the foot of the Crucifix, let us say: “Jesus my Saviour, I love you; I desire to prove this love, to glorify your Father with you; I promise to watch that nothing may come to ravage your vine, to hinder the work of your love. From all eternity you have regarded this vine with special dilection; you planted it on the day of baptism; you chose it before others in a special manner to belong to you by virginal consecration; you have watered it with your precious blood; each day you have nourished it with your adorable flesh; for love of you I desire that you shall find in me abundant fruit, both to rejoice your heart and glorify your Father.”

Let us not be discouraged by the remembrance of past infidelities or the thought of possible failures in the future; the latter spring from our nature, and can be perfectly reconciled with goodwill; the former should be the occasion for us to humble ourselves and incite us to greater generosity.

By degrees, little by little, as St. Benedict tells us, in the measure that we advance in fidelity—*processu conversationis*¹⁷ the soul will abound in light, every day the heart responding more intensely to the action of the Spirit of love “will run in the way of perfection with an incredible sweetness of love.” Thus Charity strengthens union, the bonds are tightened, adhesion to the word becomes more stable, stronger, more joyous, until it reaches the stage of permanency. The soul will then experience the truth of those magnificent words of the Apostle: “Who shall then separate me from the love of Christ, my Spouse? Shall tribulation, or distress, or famine, or nakedness, or persecution, or the sword?”¹⁸ No, nothing is capable of separating the faithful virgin from her Beloved, like the spouse in the Canticle she repeats unceasingly: “Draw me, we will run after Thee to the odour of Thy ointments”:¹⁹ *Trahe me post te curreremus in odorem unguen-*

¹⁶ Is 5:4

¹⁷ Holy Rule *Prologue*

¹⁸ Rom 8:35

¹⁹ Sg 1:3

torum tuorum; and again: “Put me as a seal upon Thy heart, for my love and my fidelity are strong as death, many waters. cannot drown them”; *Aquæ multæ non potuerunt extinguere caritatem nec flumina obruent illam.*²⁰ “For I am sure that neither death with its horrors, nor life with its seductions, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor any creature can separate her”²¹ from her Lord and Spouse. Of her it may be said here below: “That she follows the Lamb whithersoever He goeth”:²² *Quocumque ierit.* It follows “that she who is joined to the Lord is one spirit with Him”: *Qui adhæret Domino unus Spiritus est.*²³

Oh, what condition more blessed than that of the faithful soul! What state more enviable than that of the virgin always attentive for the least signs of the approach of her Spouse? Finding her with her light burning, the Spouse “will lead her into the hall of the marriage feast” and will bestow richly upon her those delights which neither speech nor pen can describe: *Intravit CUM EO ad nuptias.*²⁴

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Next in the series: Chapter Five, *Verbo Vivere, Verbo Se Regere* *

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 8:6,7

²¹ Cf. Rom 8:38, 39

²² Rev 14:4

²³ I Cor 6:17

²⁴ Cf. Matt 25:10

* Editor’s note: “To live for the Word, to be conducted by the Word”

