

# THE STATES OF PERFECTION

Address of His Holiness Pope Pius XII  
to the  
Second General Congress of the States of Perfection

December 12, 1957



**National Catholic Welfare Conference**

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- 1 Under the protection of Mary Immaculate, the most sublime of all creatures and model for all those who wish to attain the perfection of Christian life, you have wished to gather in Rome, beloved sons and daughters, to study the present problems of the states of perfection.
- 2 At the same time you have wished to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the ordination to the priesthood of the most worthy and zealous Cardinal Prefect of the Sacred Congregation of Religious. Today there are associations of major Superiors (Superiors General and Provincials), men and women religious, in more than twenty-five countries of all continents. In close collaboration with the Holy See and the ecclesiastical Hierarchy of their countries, they seek to conduct in common the tasks of organization and adaptation that are required by the wide embrace and complexity of the present-day apostolate.
- 3 We know that a great number of steps have been taken during the past few years under the enlightened impulse of your associations. It is sufficient to mention the national or regional congresses of states of perfection, the sessions of prayer and study and above all the creation of institutes of superior religious formation and culture meant for members of the states of perfection.
- 4 The present Congress, which is in complete compliance with the desire for bringing states of perfection more fully into the Church, the Mystical Body of Christ, aims at drawing up the record of progress made in the organization of the states of perfection and in their work of adaptation to the requirements of the Church.

#### *Aims and Activities*

- 5 It also aims at establishing clearly the ends to be pursued, the limits that must be respected and the principles that must be observed in the action of conferences, unions and committees of major Superiors. Lastly, it strives to draw up a program of activities and projects that will insure its effectiveness in the movement of revision, by tightening the bonds uniting organizations among themselves and with the Holy See.
- 6 The reports and exposes of this congress intend to be commentaries on the three Apostolic Constitutions *Provida*

*Mater, Sponsa Christi*, and *Sedes Sapientiae* as well as on the decree *Salutaris atque*, issued by the Sacred Congregation of Religious, which sets forth the rules that must guide the effort at adaptation and revision.

- 7 We do not intend to deal with the particular questions that you will examine during your meetings, but rather to underline certain points of a general character concerning the problem of perfection and that of the revision and adaptation of the means through which individuals and communities strive to achieve it.
- 8 We shall speak first about the perfection of Christian life in general, then of its realization in those associations that are called "states of perfection" by examining first their relations with their members and later the relations that bind them among themselves and to the Holy See.

## I. THE PERFECTION OF CHRISTIAN LIFE

- 9 It is important, first of all, to recall that the concept of "perfection" cannot be identified with the concept of "state of perfection," and that it also extends greatly beyond it. One can, in fact, encounter heroic Christian perfection, that of the Gospel and of Christ's Cross, outside of every "state of perfection."
- 10 We therefore understand the tendency toward perfection as an habitual disposition of the Christian soul through which, not content to fulfill the duties that devolve upon it under threat of sin, it surrenders itself entirely to God to love and serve Him, and consecrates itself for this same purpose to the service of its fellow man.
- 11 The perfection of every free human activity as well as that of every rational creature consists in the voluntary adherence to God. This perfection is partly obligatory because it derives from the very condition of being. One must strive to achieve it for fear of not fulfilling one's ultimate end.
- 12 We do not need to define the elements of perfection here. We intend to speak only about the habitual and permanent tendency that goes beyond all that falls within the realm of obligation and takes man wholly to consecrate him without reserve to the service of God.

- 13 This perfection consists above all in union with God which is achieved through charity. It therefore finds its fulfillment in charity. It is also called a perpetual and universal sacrifice of oneself, performed for love of God and as a voluntary expression of that love.

***The Ideal of Christian Perfection***

- 14 The ideal of Christian perfection is derived from the teachings of Christ and in particular from the evangelical counsels. It is derived from the life of Christ, from His passion and death—the inexhaustible fonts in which the heroism of all Christian generations find their nourishment. It also includes the work of Christ, that is to say, the service of the Church performed out of love for Christ, in the position and according to the function that devolve upon each one in the entire Mystical Body.
- 15 Every Christian is called upon to strive to attain this ideal of perfection with all his strength, but it is fulfilled in a more complete and certain way in the three states of perfection according to the manner described in Canon Law and in the aforementioned Apostolic Constitutions. In particular the Constitution *Provida Mater* of February 2, 1947, on “Secular Institutes” gives access to states of perfection to the greatest possible number of souls who eagerly aspire today to a more perfect life. Although this Constitution states that associations which do not meet the prescribed requirements do not constitute “states of perfection,” it does not claim in any way that there do not exist real tendencies to perfection outside the latter.
- 16 We are thinking at this moment of all those men and women from all walks of life who, assuming the most varied professions and functions in the modern world, out of love for God and in order to serve Him in their fellowmen, dedicate their person and all their activities to Him. They pledge themselves to the practice of the evangelical counsels by private and secret vows known only to God and let themselves be guided in matters of obedience and poverty by persons whom the Church has judged fit for this purpose and to whom she has entrusted the task of directing others in the exercise of perfection.
- 17 None of the constituting elements of Christian perfection and of a real tendency to achieve it are lacking in these men

and women. They therefore really take part in it although they are not committed to any juridic or canonical state of perfection.

### *Modifications in Application*

- 18 It is clear that in the essential elements of its definition and its realization, Christian perfection does not allow for any revision or adaptation. But, since the conditions of modern life undergo deep changes, modifications will be required in one's application of it.
- 19 These modifications will affect those who live in states of perfection and those who do not participate in them. But even more so the latter, especially if they hold a high social rank and even higher functions. Are they not compelled then to surround themselves with a certain wealthy apparel, take part in official functions and utilize costly means of transportation: all things that would seem to be hard to reconcile with the constant preoccupation with the mortification of one who wishes to follow and imitate the humble and poor Christ?
- 20 And yet, in the midst of material goods, they do not depart in any manner from the entire dedication of themselves to God and never cease to offer to the Lord an unreserved oblation of themselves. Such is the action of grace which works in man according to the words of Christ: "Things that are impossible with men are possible with God" (*Luke 18:27*).

## **II. STATES OF PERFECTION**

- 21 The problems of adaptation and revision within states of perfection will occupy our attention for the greater part. We shall first consider the persons that are members of the states of perfection, and later the communities themselves, in their tendency to achieve perfection.

### **1. *The Members of States of Perfection***

- 22 We shall emphasize only one point where individual persons are concerned. What We said in the first part of Our speech about the perfection of Christian life in general can also be applied to members of all states of perfection and constitutes their primary and essential duty, whether they are inferiors or superiors.

- 23 They must unite themselves to God through charity and offer themselves to Him in sacrifice, imitate and follow Him, His doctrine, His life and His Cross, consecrate themselves to the service of His work, which is the Church, as the chosen and active members of the Mystical Body. But once this essential obligation has been well established, they are not forbidden to think about revising and adapting means to achieve it, without however failing to show due respect for tradition, and without detracting from the prescriptions that are considered inviolable by constitutions.
- 24 Inferiors will furthermore observe religious discipline, which forbids them to arrogate to themselves those tasks that fall within the competence of superiors and to undertake on their own initiative reforms that they cannot attempt without their superiors' authorization.

## **2. *The Communities Themselves***

- 25 One first point should be examined, that of the mutual relations between the community as a whole and the individuals, superiors or inferiors who constitute it.
- 26 Two important elements must be taken into consideration here: first, the characteristic spirit through which the mutual relations between the communities and their members are expressed; and second, the obstacles engendered by certain prejudices against religious obedience on which essentially depends the revision of the spirit proper to the community.
- 27 An organized society constitutes a whole and has a typical aspect, which each member determines by the contribution of his own part. Every effort at adaptation undertaken within this association necessarily entails certain modifications of its spirit. That is to say, its most intimate fibers are affected in some way. But every society wants to keep this spirit intact.
- 28 It has the right and it is its duty to do so. It wants to see its members impregnated with this spirit, and it wants them to be concerned with the task of filling their own lives with it. The Church on her part and the Sovereign Pontiffs, in approving a determined way of life, expect it to be preserved in all its purity and expect careful measures to be taken in this regard.

- 29 If it is agreed that major Superiors should be granted the right to tell inferiors what the spirit of their community is, one question remains open for all: where can the objective expression of this spirit be found?

### *The Rights of Superiors*

- 30 Major superiors cannot arbitrarily decide this according to their own tastes and impressions, even though they are in good faith and completely sincere. If the major Superior is also the founder, and if his personal ideas have been approved by the Church as the norm of a state of perfection, he is always free to appeal to his own intentions. But if this is not the case, he must revert to the idea of the founder as it is expressed in the Constitutions approved by the Church.
- 31 When a Superior proposes the true spirit of the founder to the members of a community, he is exercising his right and the inferiors must in conscience obey. The rights of Superiors and the duties of inferiors are correlative in this sense.
- 32 The Church and the Sovereign Pontiffs still intend to defend rights and exhort men to their duties, but without going beyond just limits. In order to avoid aggravating one side or the other and to preserve peace, it is sufficient that each individual should recognize and follow this rule, which has been the rule of the Church and the Popes for centuries and is still in force.
- 33 As regards present difficulties concerning religious obedience, it has been noted that the movement of adaptation has created a certain amount of tension in this field; not through a lack of sincere desire to aim at perfection through obedience, but because there is today particular emphasis upon certain aspects of obedience that even serious and conscientious religious would like to see disappear.

### *The Practice of Obedience*

- 34 The specific observation has been made that the practice of obedience endangers the human dignity of the religious, hinders the full development of his personality and might even alter his orientation toward God alone. It seems that these objections are supported by certain disillusion experi-

enced personally or noted in others, and that they are also related to various juridic considerations.

- 35 In order to dispel a feeling of sadness arising from a misinterpretation of the principles governing the religious life or from practical errors in their application, one must recall first of all the words of the Lord: "Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest . . . learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart; and you will find rest in your souls" (*Matthew 12:29*).
- 36 If the Lord thus exhorts men to take His yoke upon themselves, it is to teach them that beyond observance under law that can easily become costly and hard to bear, they must discover the meaning of real submission and Christian humility. Far from offending the dignity of the one who submits to them, the latter free him within and make him regard the acceptance of his state of subjection not as a constraint imposed upon him by external forces, but as an abandonment of himself into the hands of God whose will expresses itself through the visible authority of those whose mission it is to command.
- 37 The Superior, for his part, will exercise his powers in the same evangelical spirit: "Let him who is greatest among you become as the youngest, and him who is the chief as the servant" (*Luke 22:26*). Necessary firmness will therefore always be allied in him to the profound respect and tactfulness of a fatherly heart.

#### *Evolution of the Human Personality*

- 38 Does the religious state hinder the harmonious evolution of the human personality? Does it compel it to remain in a certain "infantile" state, as some people claim?
- 39 Let us then observe without prejudice the behavior of men and women who belong to the states of perfection. No one would dare say that the majority of them are suffering from infantilism in their intellectual and emotional life, or in their actions. But, pursuing the objection further, one could not claim either that, at least, the communities and Superiors compel them, with the passing of time, to adopt modes of thought and action that would lend themselves to this censure.

- 40 Those who make this complaint should remember that when St. Paul established for the faithful the goal of an ordered life according to the faith, he invited them to grow in the "building up of the body of Christ" until they all attained "perfect manhood, to the mature measure of the fullness of Christ."
- 41 "And this," he adds, "he has done that we may be now no longer children" (*Ephesians* 4:12,13). The Apostle therefore does not allow the faithful to yield to infantilism, but he demands that they become "perfect men."
- 42 Furthermore, in the first epistle to the Corinthians, he rejected most explicitly in adult Christians all the mannerisms of thought and feeling that characterized childhood. "When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I felt as a child, I thought as a child. Now that I have become a man, I have put away the things of a child" (*I Cor.* 13:11).

#### ***The Role of Sound Education***

- 43 We quoted this text before in Our speech of April 18, 1952, when speaking on the education of the Christian conscience, to recall that the role of a sound education is to teach man how to make a discerning use of his freedom and to dispense with the help of a teacher. May each member of the states of perfection, whether he is a Superior or an inferior, apply the Apostle's words to himself. Every danger of infantilism will then disappear, without however affecting respect for legitimate authority or sincere submission to its decisions.
- 44 We shall not retract what We said in the address We delivered on December 8, 1950, to the first Congress of the States of Perfection, in which we gave answer to objections that had been raised against an alleged lessening of the personal and social value of the religious. If his rights are subject to certain limitations, the state to which he belongs and the offering he makes of himself through obedience confer upon him a dignity that generously compensates for the sacrifice he has freely made.
- 45 Still another argument used against obedience is based on the claim that the subjection of man to a Superior would be opposed to the supreme and direct domination of God over consciences. In claiming that a man falls under the

dependence of another even in his personal life and activity, does not one say that prerogatives are conferred upon the Superior that belong to God alone?

- 46 The Church, as a matter of fact, has never defended nor approved such a thesis. She looks upon obedience as a means of leading man to God. Since obedience is motivated by a desire for union with God and since it is ultimately related to the increase of charity, the Superior does not in any way constitute an obstacle placed between God and the inferior, diverting to his own profit the homage rendered to God alone.
- 47 A Superior can command only in the name of the Lord and by virtue of his powers of office, and an inferior must obey only out of love for Christ, and not for human reasons of utility or convenience, even less out of pure constraint. In this way the religious subject will preserve in total submission the joyful alacrity of one who confirms through a concrete daily pledge the total giving of himself to his only Master.
- 48 The program of your Second General Congress shows that it must deal amply with the problem of relations of communities among themselves along the lines of adaptation and revision that you are pursuing. It is therefore not Our intention to enter into details on these matters. We feel certain, furthermore, that the rules established by the Sacred Congregation of Religious will be faithfully observed.

#### ***Effort Toward Union and Collaboration***

- 49 It will be sufficient for Us to recall that, while preserving the differences that now exist and must continue to exist among communities, a sincere and benevolent effort toward union and collaboration must be made. There is, in fact, a kind of "common welfare" of communities, which supposes that each one is ready to take others into account and to adapt itself to the requirements of a coordination that necessarily implies also some renunciation in view of the general welfare.
- 50 The principle St. Paul expounds in the well-known passage of the first Epistle to the Corinthians (*I Cor.* 12:12-27) concerning the relations of members among themselves, also

holds true by analogy for your communities, which are united by divine grace in the Body of the Church. Each member of the Body is entitled to receive the help of the collaboration of all with a view to the one and only common welfare, that of the Holy Church. It is easy to deduce from this sentiments of esteem, benevolence, courtesy, the will to collaborate, holy emulation and magnanimous disinterestedness that will preside over the relations of communities among themselves.

- 51 Each member must assuredly value his own nature and his own function within the Body, but he must also understand and respect the function of others and know how to harmonize with others for the greatest common welfare.
- 52 That which pertains to the relations between states of perfection and the Vicar of Christ and the Holy See does not need to be recalled. The prerogatives of the Apostolic See, established by the institution of Christ Himself and clarified and defined by the Church in the course of the centuries, must remain inviolable and sacred. If the faithful respect and comply with them, those who are in a state of perfection must give the good example. There is therefore a need to try to establish and maintain contact with the Holy See.

***Trust, Sincerity and Docility***

- 53 In the Encyclical *Humani Generis* We indicated that the tendency to avoid establishing this contact and to keep at a distance was one of the principal reasons for the errors and deviations that were mentioned there. This unfortunate attitude was particularly the doing of certain members of the states of perfection. In order to be effective, these contacts will have to be established in a climate of complete trust, sincerity and docility.
- 54 The Holy See wants to receive from you information which is not only true but frank, so that it may know the real state of each community where doctrine and life, ascetic formation and observance, religious discipline and temporal administration and the rest are concerned. Then only can it be possible to promote good and correct evil in time, for in the favorable attitudes of mind of which We speak, the responses, regulations and instructions of the Holy See bear fruit.

55 There is another thing We do not want to miss the opportunity to say a word about, and that is the wish for "centralization" which a great number have attributed to the Holy See and complained to the Holy See about.

*The Holy See the Directing Center of the Church*

56 The word "centralization" can designate a system of government that claims to take everything into its own hands, to decide and to direct everything and reduce all subalterns to the mere role of instruments. This centralization is absolutely foreign to the spirit of the Roman Pontiffs and the Apostolic See. But the Holy See cannot renounce its position as the directing center of the Church. While leaving to the constituted Superiors the initiatives provided for by the Constitutions, it must preserve its rights and exercise its function of vigilance.

57 It seems to Us that the things that should be said on the subject of the revision and adaptation of relations of the communities among themselves and with the Holy See are sufficiently indicated in your program. The principles We have indicated will give you a lead, and We feel certain that you will know how to delve deeply into them with good result.

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58 The realm of perfection, into which We have briefly entered with you, is quite extensive and beautiful, but there still remain some parts of it to explore. We have called your attention to perfection in general and to perfection within the state of perfection. A great number of laymen, as well as clerics and religious, are taking an interest in these questions today.

59 By comparing them with certain modern ideas and principles, they detect in them a number of serious and complex problems, the solution of which escapes them however, in spite of a strong desire to find it. That is why We wished to throw some light on these matters, by recalling the principles that will enable us to find an answer.

60 Bringing this address to a close, We give you another thought expressed by St. Paul in his Epistle to the Colossians: "But above all these things have charity, which is the bond of perfection" (*Colossians* 3:14).

61 Beyond all problems and discussions, seek first of all union with God, and you will constantly draw closer to perfection. This is the grace that We wish for you and implore upon you, while heartily granting you Our paternal Apostolic Benediction.



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