

DALMATIUS MADDEN, O.P. & FRANCIS SYLVE

Madden, Dalmatius
Teach us to love.
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TEACH US TO LOVE

Sisters' Conference Needs

**Dominican Sisters
St. Francis de Sales Convent
Riverside, California**

TEACH US TO LOVE

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Sisters' Conference Needs

PREFACE

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PREFACE

Dear Father:

I believe that when a sister goes into retreat she is not only doing it out of obedience, but (God and heaven know) she is in need of one.

Picture this, if you will: a sister on the missions from September till June—let's presume she is a teaching sister. She has a hard class; the organization of the school leaves much to be desired; and she has no one to turn to for help. This sister can't help but be sad for ten months, since the human (and we are!) body and mind can take only so much. And now it's time for retreat; the retreat master stands up, and the roof on the building almost parts, as he, with all the vigor in him, shouts, "There is a hell!!! and it's about time sisters begin to think about hell!" The sisters come out of the retreat with less spiritual balance than when they went in. There is nothing sadder. It follows, then, that the retreat master must have a real interest in—I would say, a love for—the task he is undertaking. If he doesn't, then I believe more harm than good is done.

Sisters need spiritual food to last for almost a year, since, during the year, we are preoccupied or interrupted—even during spiritual reading. . . . We go to retreat right after school closes in June, or after summer school;

we are worn out, but we welcome the thought of retreat, because it will mean rest for body and soul.

The sisters look to you, Father, for inspiration, encouragement, and understanding. Make them feel you are at their service, even for private help, if need be.

We want to hear something that will make us want to be saints!

*The Sisters**

PREFACE

Dear Father:

I believe that when a sister goes into retreat she is not only doing it out of obedience, but (God and heaven know) she is in need of one.

Please that if you will: a sister on the retreat from September till June--let's presume she is a working sister. She has a hard time: the organization of the school does not seem to be done; and she has no one to turn to for help. The sister can't help but get for two months, since the winter (and we wish) body and mind can take only so much. And now it's time for retreat; the retreat master stands up and the roof of the building almost goes up with all the girls in the school. There is a hill and it's about time sisters begin to think about hills. The sisters come out of the retreat with less spiritual balance than when they went in. It is nothing sudden. It follows that the retreat master would have a real interest in--I would say a love for--the work he is undertaking. If he doesn't, then I believe from now on that is done.

Sisters need spiritual food to eat for about a year. Some during the year are preoccupied or interrupted --

*This letter is a composite, taken from several replies to our survey.

INTRODUCTION

To gain an insight into their future apostolate a group of young priests studying at the Aquinas Institute, Dubuque, Iowa, drew up a questionnaire that was aimed at finding out what the sisters need and want in their annual retreats and monthly conferences. Most of the questions were general in scope to encourage the sisters to voice their own feelings more freely than they might in replying to a more detailed, check-list kind of questionnaire.*

This questionnaire was mailed by the priests to a number of sisters they knew personally. The response was enthusiastic. Many of the 212 sisters who replied took the time to write letters containing suggestions they had long wished to make to their retreat and conference preachers. (In addition, 52 novices filled out the questionnaire, but their replies are not included in this report, except where their reaction is specifically mentioned.)

*The questionnaire was made up of the following questions:

1. What, in your opinion, should be the *purpose* of the annual retreat?
2. a) Should it be concrete, i.e., *practical*?
b) Should the retreat master be acquainted with the rule of your community?
3. What are the sisters' chief *complaints* about retreat masters?
4. What specific *topics* would you like to hear conferences on; what subjects need to be stressed?
5. What *faults* do sisters need help in overcoming?
6. What causes sisters their greatest pain and *suffering*?

The sisters taking part in this survey are a representative cross-section from 46 convents, of 23 communities, in 12 states. They included teachers, nurses, domestics, administrators, and cloistered contemplatives.

The sisters' replies were so helpful that Father Madden, who conducted the survey, mimeographed the results and sent them to priests of his acquaintance and to the sisters who had replied to the questionnaire. As the demand for copies steadily grew, however, the survey was prepared for publication by Father MacNutt and submitted to editors of *Cross and Crown*, who agreed to print it for distribution to priests and professed sisters.*

Since the replies are sometimes critical it was decided to leave the identities of individual sisters and their communities hidden. We wanted the sisters to speak their minds; and they did.

The following pages are the result. The best parts are in the sisters' own words, laying open their inmost spiritual needs. We are confident that any priest reading these words will sense the sisters' consuming thirst for holiness, and will be determined to see that his own sermons are a worthy instrument through which the Holy Spirit can guide, enlighten, and encourage the sisters who hear his word.

—Or, rather, the Word of God.

*In publishing this survey we are aware of the excellent book *Sisters' Retreats* (Westminster, Md.: The Newman Press, 1963) by Thomas Dubay, S.M. This book is based on replies from 701 sisters to a similar but more extended questionnaire. We heartily recommend it.

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TEACH US TO LOVE

A WOMAN'S APPROACH TO THE SPIRITUAL LIFE

The psychological approach to man and woman in the spiritual life is usually very different from the approach of a man. In a woman's life the spiritual life is not a matter of a few moments, but a matter of a lifetime. She is not a person who is called to a particular service, but a person who is called to a particular way of life. She is not a person who is called to a particular task, but a person who is called to a particular way of being. She is not a person who is called to a particular place, but a person who is called to a particular way of living. She is not a person who is called to a particular time, but a person who is called to a particular way of existing. She is not a person who is called to a particular thing, but a person who is called to a particular way of relating to the world.

Consequently, when a woman is called to a spiritual life, she is called to a way of being that is different from the way of being of a man. She is called to a way of being that is more intimate, more personal, more inward. She is called to a way of being that is more sensitive, more responsive, more open. She is called to a way of being that is more loving, more caring, more compassionate. She is called to a way of being that is more faithful, more devoted, more committed. She is called to a way of being that is more honest, more sincere, more genuine. She is called to a way of being that is more whole, more complete, more fulfilled.

Apparently, many do not. One of the major reasons for this is that many women are not being taught the spiritual life of women. They are being taught the spiritual life of men, which is a different matter altogether. They are being taught to be like men, which is not the way of being of a woman. They are being taught to be like men, which is not the way of being of a woman. They are being taught to be like men, which is not the way of being of a woman.

In view of this difficulty, several authors have written books which are devoted to the spiritual life of women. These books are written by women, and they are written for women. They are written to help women to understand their own spiritual life, and to help them to live it more fully. They are written to help women to understand their own spiritual life, and to help them to live it more fully. They are written to help women to understand their own spiritual life, and to help them to live it more fully.

I

A WOMAN'S APPROACH TO THE SPIRITUAL LIFE

The psychological approach of men and women to the spiritual life is usually very different: what appeals to a man in a sermon may not appeal to a feminine audience at all. If the retreat master fails to understand the basic psychological needs of women, his sermons will not only fail to interest the sisters, but will fail to show them how grace can build upon their womanly nature. "The holier a woman is," wrote Leon Bloy, "the more she is a woman."

Consequently, what inspires a woman to seek sanctity is different from what motivates a man. The retreat master must take this difference into account in every sermon he writes.

Apparently, many do not. One of the sisters' common complaints is that priests often seem to misunderstand the spiritual needs of women.

In view of this difficulty several sisters made positive suggestions as to how a retreat master can best appeal to religious women. Their suggestions are based upon two natural feminine qualities: (1) the desire to love and

be loved—the woman as bride; (2) the desire to give life—the woman as mother.

To Love and be Loved

Woman's natural desire for love is raised to the supernatural order through charity. A woman religious is eager to be convinced that God loves her, and she readily understands that her true perfection can only come through her returning God's love as generously as she can. This, of course, is the essence of Christianity, and woman, by her natural disposition to love, is admirably fitted to appreciate this basic aspect of the spiritual life.

Consequently, the sisters want priests to help them understand how God himself fulfills their natural desire to love and be loved; they expressed this feeling by such statements as the following:

Help us to understand our bridehood with Christ—as a fulfillment of our womanhood.

Women were born to love, and if this isn't turned to God or others for the sake of God, then it will turn back upon self.

The retreats I liked best were the ones in which the retreat master stressed love for God and saving souls—where he made us realize that the more we love God, the easier it is to bear the crosses and difficulties of our daily life—"Love makes all things easy." Every state of life has its crosses but, in comparison, ours are less difficult to bear because of our consecration through the vows.

This desire of the sisters to center their lives upon love will become still more manifest when we consider, in the section on the subjects they most desire, their number one choice as topic: charity.

The Desire to Give Life

The second basic feminine desire is to give life and to help the one to whom she gives it. In the natural order this desire is perfected when woman becomes a

mother, bringing new life into the world and nurturing it after birth.

This desire is raised to the supernatural order through spiritual motherhood by which sisters bring forth Christ to the world (through the missionary apostolate) or nurture him in the souls of others by ministering to their spiritual needs (through teaching) or to their physical needs (through nursing and domestic care). The sisters expressed this desire as follows:

Help us to be unselfish by showing us how to be generous in the giving of the life we receive from Christ—a fulfillment of our need as women to give life.

The special vocation of all religious is to manifest to the world the love of God for men . . . That is quite an order. It should be highly motivating, however, to consider that all that we are and do manifests to the world God's love anew. This is especially true of religious women for this reason: on the natural level men are thinkers rather than lovers, whereas women are lovers rather than thinkers. Men, then, represent the Son, the Wisdom of God to men. Women represent the Holy Spirit, the love of God to men. When wisdom perfects charity, we have the perfect example in Mary, the Virgin-Mother. Hence, the source of the fruitfulness of religious women lies in this: when wisdom perfects charity in the consecrated woman, she becomes the virgin-bride, interested in the interests of her bridegroom.

Over and above her natural "vocation" to represent the Holy Spirit, she, by her consecration and the living of it, represents him as no other woman, other than Mary, can. Thus we see that through her consecrated life she is able and obliged to manifest to the world the great love of God for men. This manifestation is her bringing forth of life which is so necessary and natural to her as a woman (virgin-bride and mother).

This sister's remarks suggest that the retreat master set forth, as the perfect embodiment of God's plan for woman, Mary—she who was perfectly united to God by her vow as virgin, and who, as Mother of God, brought forth Christ to all mankind. As consecrated virgin she loved God above all else; as Mother of Christ she loved both

God and man; and as Mother of Grace she brings forth supernatural life in every Christian soul.

The retreat master, a man, and therefore not likely to feel any quickening of the pulse over the thought of someone being a bride or mother, can easily forget to appeal to the sisters precisely as *women*—religious women, but women nevertheless, with all the dispositions to grace that God has implanted in their nature.

Woman, destined by nature to be wife and mother, is meant to be the heart of the home; it is to her heart, her desire to love, that the speaker can make his strongest appeal. But man, naturally destined to be head of the family, may forget to appeal to woman's heart. He may, instead, be inclined to give conferences that are too coldly intellectual to touch a feminine audience. (This may explain why so many sisters stress their need for inspiration and encouragement from retreat masters.)

St. Augustine, speaking of Martha and Mary, aptly summed up the two basic propensities of woman: love and service:

“In the beginning was the Word”:

to him Mary was listening.

“The Word was made flesh”:

Him was Martha serving.

(*Sermones de Scripturis*, 104, chap. 2)

II

THE PURPOSE OF THE RETREAT

Since the retreat master's over-all purpose should govern everything he proposes to say, it is all-important that he decide upon a general goal before sitting down to prepare his conferences.

The sisters gave their own suggestions as to what they thought this goal should be in answer to the question: "What, in your opinion, should be the purpose of your annual retreat?" The replies showed that, above all else, they want encouragement.

The percentages broke down as follows:

- 1) Eleven per cent wanted *enlightenment*, or a doctrinal retreat.
- 2) Forty-two per cent indicated that they were mainly interested in encouragement or in an inspirational retreat.
- 3) Thirty-four per cent showed their preference for a moral retreat. They sought increased *motivation* together with practical means for seeking Christian perfection.
- 4) Thirteen per cent expressed no preference.

THE THREE BASIC GOALS

Following are the sisters' views on each of these three basic goals open to the retreat master.

1. Enlightenment

Only 11% of the sisters said they thought enlightenment should be the main purpose of a retreat, but even among those who mentioned "encouragement" or "motivation" first, there was an insistent demand for a stronger doctrinal foundation underlying the conferences than the sisters had been receiving in the past.

Following are some comments:

I have often wished that retreat masters would give us some theology we never had the opportunity to learn. For instance, couldn't a retreat master bring in some of the theology of grace without getting into something that would be too deep?

"Theory, theory, theory! Nothing practical," I hear someone say . . . But most sermons are so devoted to exhortation (the moral type), with a few stories thrown in by way of example, that we are doctrinally starved. Seeing Scripture as the source of dogma, and dogma clarifying Scripture, as well as seeing both in the liturgy, the place where both meet—teaching us and leading us to God: this is practically non-existent!

The general caliber is higher than it was twenty-five years ago, and the sister-formation movement certainly makes this more universally true across the country. The days of pietistic devotionalism are passed for most religious. Sisters need theological meat—not pablum.

The teaching sisters, as would be expected, desire a strong intellectual backing for their spiritual lives, but several nursing and domestic sisters, too, wrote to ask for a fuller explanation of Christ's teachings than they have sometimes been given.

Closely connected with their desire for solid content is the sisters' demand for clear order in conferences. In

reply to the question: "What are your chief *complaints* in regard to retreat masters?" Some 6% (most of them teachers and, therefore, especially sensitive on this score) mentioned that some retreats they had heard could profit by better arrangement:

Retreat masters should avoid rambling; we can't follow them.

It seems to help if the retreat master gives some type of general outline of the retreat at the beginning.

On the other hand, some sisters commented on the danger of stultifying the retreat through the opposite fault of imposing an artificial order or by exaggerating the obvious:

Skim rapidly over the obvious. (If you are talking to nursing sisters, perhaps you will need a different approach, considering their physical exhaustion.) But don't spell everything out; leave something to their personal pondering.

I dislike forced themes, such as fitting all the conferences into the theme of the Rosary, the Stations of the Cross, or the like.

In short, the sisters desire order, as long as it is not excessive. Belaboring the obvious leads to boredom.

2. *Encouragement*

The majority of sisters (42%) who expressed a preference said that the hoped-for outcome of their retreat was a spirit of renewed fervor, to be achieved through the inspiration of the retreat master's conferences. Their insistent demand for encouragement is especially meaningful when studied in the light of chapter IV, on the emotional needs of sisters, which investigates *discouragement*, the greatest source of temptation to many women religious.

By encouragement they do not mean, of course, a pat on the back or a sentimental treatment of the spiritual life, but, rather, inspiring conferences that will enflame their hearts with a fervent desire for union with Christ.

The sisters expressed themselves on this point:

✓ We want to hear something that will make us desire to be saints. An inspirational retreat gives new life.

High ideals should be stressed.

We don't want to be merely criticized.

Avoid negativism—telling us what is wrong with us and with our lives but not suggesting remedies.

By retreat time the sisters have little energy left to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps; they need to be uplifted spiritually.

Since so many sisters name encouragement as the primary goal of the retreat, special emphasis should be given to the virtue of hope.

✓ 3. *Motivation*

To 34% of the sisters responding, motivation was the main goal of the retreat. The sisters expressed this practical goal in three general ways:

Incentive (a forward push to seek love of God with all our heart and soul and to learn practical means whereby we might find him).....9%

Union with God (or, seeking Christian perfection through the means provided; or, living the interior life).....15%

Practical Spirituality (how to live a good religious life in the modern world, how to realize the potentialities involved in the religious life, definite means for drawing close to God, and so forth).....10%

These statements differ only slightly, according as they stress motivation or practical means for striving after perfection.

SHOULD THE RETREAT BE PRACTICAL?

If you remember, one of the questions was: "Should the retreat be concrete, i.e., practical?" The response was a unanimous "Yes!" (with certain reservations which shall be set down later).

The following comments are typical:

Definitely, yes; usually retreats are so scheduled that sisters make them at times when they are physically and mentally exhausted and too tired to ferret out everything for themselves.

How to reconcile the active and contemplative lives; how to strive for ideals with your feet on the ground.

Specific helps for teachers, nurses, domestic sisters, and those who have more jobs than they can handle—at least in their opinion.

Avoid bookishness. . . . Too many times the conferences have all the “impact” of a Tanqueray chapter.

Make the sister feel she has something to hang on to—not just a set of theoretical principles, cold and lifeless in themselves.

We want to be shown how to live a good religious life; theory we can get from good religious books.

Yes—down to earth, everyday problems that each sister has to handle but needs help for—in regard to other sisters, priests, the classroom, and public relations in general.

Women seem to grasp ideas better when these ideas are presented in the concrete.

Women are not so much ruled by the head as by the heart; therefore, appeal to their emotions (to a degree). Also, God has given women a certain imaginativeness which explains why they can adapt more quickly to changing circumstances and more frequently jump to conclusions (not necessarily wrong ones), while men usually have to think things through to a conclusion, step by step, until they are convinced. Of course, men ordinarily think farther and more deeply, but we won't go into that. If you can bring human interest elements and examples from the lives of individuals into your explanations to feminine audiences, you are more likely to succeed in getting them to grasp what you're trying to say. The sisters will tend to identify themselves with the person under consideration and will either sympathize or condemn. At any rate you'll get a reaction.

Some conferences are just too theoretical to be of any serious value.

On the use of examples in making a retreat practical, here are two samples:

The lowest I ever remember striking was a retreat master who, in the course of a couple of years, gave a girl's, a woman's, and a sister's retreat in our chapel. He told the girls little stories about Gasolina, Kerosena, and other adulterated feminine names; the women about Mrs. Gasolina, Mrs. Kerosena, etc.; the sisters about Sister Gasolina, Sister Kerosena, etc. That's all I remember about his retreat.

Make the gospel stories of Christ live, so that the retreatant will want to re-read the New Testament and become imbued with the spirit of Christ.

SHOULD THE RETREAT MASTER KNOW THE CONSTITUTIONS?

Replies to the question "Should the retreat master be acquainted with the rule and constitutions of your particular community?" brought the following results:

Yes	74%
A very definite yes	21%
Not necessarily	5%

Among the 95% majority who believe the retreat master should understand their rule, a large number mentioned the mistakes made when a retreat master fails to understand their rule:

Yes, so he won't make comments that don't apply; e.g., a whole conference on the value of the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin Mary when we don't even say it. Also, in regard to silence: some communities stress it, others don't.

It insures against the retreat master's giving advice and direction which go *counter* to the particular rule.

Aside from helping him avoid mistakes a knowledge of the rule can be a great positive assistance:

Our constitutions are our "stepping stones" to heaven; if the retreat master is going to teach us how to walk, he definitely should know them. The retreat master who is acquainted with the particular spirituality of the congregation can be most effective if his conferences reflect that spirituality.

In this regard, even a knowledge of the founder or foundress and his or her spirit would be of great practical

assistance. We all have a cherished heritage that at times is overlooked.

The sisters have more confidence in you if you know more about their way of life. In our last retreat Father ended a few of his conferences with a colloquy which contained a prayer for some special grace or virtue. Immediately after this, he would open a copy of our holy rule and read the article which referred to whatever the virtue may have been. It was very effective.

If he is not given the rule, he should request it in order to be of assistance.

There is no reason why the retreat master should not combine all three elements—doctrinal, moral, and inspirational—within the scope of his retreat: his conferences should be theologically sound to give the sisters an intellectual foundation upon which to build their spiritual lives; his conferences should offer them encouragement in their hope of becoming saints; and his talks can offer practical advice showing the sisters how to grow in union with God in spite of the complexities of modern life.

III

MORAL NEEDS OF THE SISTERS

To help the retreat master stress the real moral needs of his hearers we asked the sisters: "What faults and difficulties do sisters need help in overcoming?"

From their replies it is clear that three major problems, at least, deserve one or more conferences in any sisters' retreat:

- 1) Problems of sisterly charity arising from community life,
- 2) Difficulties in the life of prayer and
- 3) Problems in obedience.

VARIOUS FAULTS AND DIFFICULTIES

The following is a list of the sisters' faults, as they see them, listed in order of frequency of mention:

1. Against *Charity* (89%)
 - a) Uncharitableness54%
 - b) Self-love (selfishness)31%
 - c) Refusal to accept different personalities 4%

2. Against the Interior Life of *Prayer* (54%)
 - a) Difficulties with prayer in general14%
 - b) Lack of recollection11%
 - c) Spiritual aridity 9%
 - d) Difficulties in meditation 8%
 - e) Inability to combine the active and contempla-
tive lives 6%
 - f) Problems with silence 2%
 - g) Failure to find spiritual direction 2%
 - h) Failure to keep up spiritual reading 2%
3. Against *Community Life* (Combining faults against
charity, justice, and prudence) (47%)
 - a) Misunderstandings15%
 - b) Difficulties of community life in general11%
 - c) Misunderstanding of subjects by superiors 6%
 - d) Failure to mind one's own business 6%
 - e) Failure to understand problem sisters 6%
 - f) Defects in recreation 3%
4. Against *Vows* (22%)
 - a) Against obedience18%
 - 1) Resentment of authority10%
 - 2) Difficulties of obedience in general 7%
 - 3) Dislike of assignment 1%
 - b) Against chastity (unbecoming thoughts, words,
and actions) 2%
 - c) Against poverty 2%
5. Against *Hope* (Lack of trust in God)14%
6. Against *Magnanimity* (Pettiness) 6%
7. Against *Prudence* (Lack of Balance) 4%
8. Against *Temperance* (Worldliness) 4%

These figures show that the sisters consider that their greatest moral problems are interpersonal: trying to love one another and to surmount the frictions of community life. Even the formidable difficulties of the life of prayer—the aridities, “dark nights,” and the bustle of the active life—fade into a distant second place when compared to

the proverbial womanly problem of trying to live peaceably and lovingly under one roof. As one sister put it, "The faults of women in general are the chief faults of sisters."

In comparison to men religious it appears that women have more difficulty in practicing charity, in maintaining hope in the face of discouragement, and in handling questions of justice and prudence that arise in community life. On the other hand, compared to what we might expect to find in a similar survey conducted among men, we discover that difficulties with poverty and chastity are far down the list of problems deserving mention. Although several of those consulted, decried the relaxation of the standard of poverty in their convents, nevertheless, sisters in general have set a splendid example for the world in regard to poverty and chastity.

We now turn to a particular examination of what the sisters themselves say about the various faults listed above (some of their comments may, of course, hold true only for some convents of some communities):

I. Against Charity

Such a large majority of sisters (89%) mention uncharitableness and allied faults that it is clear that this is a problem with which all preachers must be concerned.

Charity should be *the* virtue in those aspiring to love God above all things.

A positive treatment of the theological and moral virtues indirectly throws light on a person's faults while at the same time giving the means of overcoming them. A positive theological treatment of the virtue of charity would be better than berating sisters for their uncharitableness.

I think lack of charity is the biggest offender.

Fraternal charity should be stressed because we do rub elbows every day.

The chief means of showing love of God is by beginning with amiability and kindness to our fellow religious. The little courtesies mean so much in daily life.

A lack of real charity towards others—not charity which confines itself to the service of others, but one which makes us truly interested in the other people and makes us love them as they are.

Meeting uncharitableness (especially hard for the younger sisters to face).

The terrible selfishness that gets hold of so many religious is no small matter today. The lack of the spirit of sacrifice in modern religious—and in the old—gives little glory to God and to the state of religion. This appears to me as one of the most prominent difficulties in religious houses and communities.

Getting down to more particular failings against charity, the sisters mention the following:

a) A simple lack of consideration:

Lack of understanding of others' needs, that is, of sympathy for one's neighbor's trials.

Little understanding and sympathy with other members of the community.

Inconsideration of others, both religious and lay (in neglecting correspondence, ordinary courtesy, and the like).

Superficial interest in others, especially the suffering.

b) Uncharitable talk:

The chief fault seems to be the uncharitable conversation among the sisters during the school year.

We tend at times to backbiting, inconsiderateness, complaining, exaggeration of little things, doubting the sincerity of others, holding grudges, and never giving another a chance to change or improve.

If sisters have faults, the superior (or someone else who is able to do so) should tell them—but not everyone else.

c) Refusing to speak:

Refusing to speak to a particular sister. One way women show you they don't like what you do is by not talking to you: that is the biggest trouble here. We need more togetherness, more dependence on one another for our needs. We need to forget as well as forgive.

d) Jealousy:

Jealousy at the success of other sisters; criticism of sisters and superiors.

Ganging up on a sister by turning the community against her for some silly reason.

Children visiting the room of another teacher. Jealousy causes trouble here. The children should be free to talk to whomever they wish. So often they can talk to a former teacher better than the one they have now. We must think of the good of the child, even if at times we must swallow our pride.

Often, of course, these failings in charity overflow into sins against justice (as in the instance given above where the community is turned against an individual):

Justice—sometimes neglected in an emphasis on charity and mercy.

How can we eat the flesh of Christ each morning and tear down the good name of others?

Expecting that degree of perfection in others for which we ourselves are not willing to suffer; frequent fault-finding; talebearing; divulging community affairs to seculars; favoritism shown to certain pupils and neglect to others.

The reverse of the love of neighbor is inordinate self-love; many sisters note its presence among the daughters of Eve:

Self-centeredness; lack of generosity and feeling for others; desire for approval and prestige; a failure to realize that such desires are rather unlike Christ's.

Selfishness, curiosity, obstinate tenacity to one's own opinion, and a lot of petty characteristics we should pass over as being too small to be concerned about.

Immaturity—so many sisters act in an infantile or selfish way; our lives can be ego-centric or Christo-centric.

Competition; seeking to be popular; living for recognition; ambitiousness in the extreme.

Sensitivity; subjectivity; dwelling on self instead of on God; competition among sisters and a great desire for success rather than the desire to serve God.

Summing it all up, one sister pithily remarked, "The ego should be abolished."

2. *Against the Interior Life of Prayer*

More than half the sisters (54%) mentioned that difficulties in prayer demand attention. Next to problems of charity they regard this as their most important moral need, to which the retreat master can profitably devote one or more conferences. The following suggestions and difficulties are mentioned:

→ Suggestions should be given on how to make the daily meditation more profitable.

Danger of routine in spiritual exercises.

Help in overcoming distraction during meditation.

Sleeping during meditation.

→ How to make the particular examen a more profitable exercise; how to meet the difficulties which are bound to arise as one progresses in mental prayer; positive suggestions as to how to unify the entire spiritual life, e.g., by making one truth of our faith a dominant motivating factor in one's life; how to make weekly confessions more fruitful—this help, I think, could best be given in the confessional after some general directions were given in a conference.

A lack of spiritual reading (you tend to let it go till later and eventually don't even think about it).

Lack of recollection is a big difficulty. Keeping one's eyes on God and not on self in all things.

Looking at ordinary events from a natural rather than from a supernatural point of view.

Failure to see God's will in all the events of daily life.

One problem with prayer that deeply disturbs some sisters is that of reconciling the bustle of active life with a contemplative spirit. Since sisters usually have meditation early in the morning before breakfast and then work hard the rest of the day, the apparent contradiction between the active and contemplative lives is a serious question demanding a satisfying answer. This very real difficulty should not be fobbed off with a bland assertion to the effect that the problem is a false one and that action and prayer reinforce each other. So true!—but how

to achieve this happy state and reconcile a crowded schedule with contemplation?

Reconciling the need for spiritual exercises with an overcrowded daily order; learning how to practice recollection in the midst of the confusion of work.

In her busy day the sister must learn to turn her thoughts to God within her; I think encouragement in this area would help; how to work hard all day and still keep one's thoughts centered on God.

The difficulty of living a spiritual life in the midst of the rush of everyday work.

Inability to remain recollected under the stress of vocational duties.

The danger of putting the works of the day ahead of the spiritual life of prayer.

Other sisters mention the ever-present problem of how to handle spiritual aridity, another question to which the retreat master might easily devote an entire conference.

3. *Against Community Life*

The friction of different personalities living together in close contact might seem, at first glance, to involve the virtue of charity alone, but community life also requires a complex mixture of justice, prudence, and patience. Forty-seven percent of the sisters remark that community life is a hard challenge. When this number is mingled with the 89% who mentioned uncharitableness, we see that almost all the sisters feel that lack of the interpersonal virtues of charity and justice creates their major moral difficulty:

Community living is the great purifier.

Useless complaining; personality clashes; uncharitable conversations; evil acts of jealousy; cliques; ungenerous "give and take"; disloyalty to one's community; undue familiarity with outsiders.

Not enough interest in the general good.

Selfishness, boastfulness, criticism, lack of community spirit, charity, obedience, respect for authority.

Self-pity, discouragement, human respect, jealousy, refusal to submit or to delegate authority, pride, boasting,

looking down upon others, criticism of others, inferiority (and also superiority) complexes, suspicion of others.

Not all the problems of community life are caused by sin; many are simply the result of differences of temperament and background leading almost inevitably, unless directed by charity, to blind misunderstandings:

An unwillingness to accept and put up with the faults of others.

How to adjust to conflicting characters; recreations which are only mortifications because restricted, annoying, and unprofitable.

Little oddities and idiosyncracies some sisters develop over a period of time. Learn to smile and accept cheerfully the little inconveniences and annoyances of daily life.

Lack of consideration for others in a host of ways. Imposing on others when unnecessary. Taking advantage of those who are somewhat timid or less brassy.

Sisters retired from active duty should keep mind and body as active as possible without interfering with younger members, lamenting the "good old days," head-shaking over present times and ways, and demanding attention (fifty-eight years professed).

One sister divided the faults against community life according to age groups:

For the *young*: those against community charity; imprudence; tendencies to levity; cliquishness; sophistication.

For the *older* sisters: criticism.

For *all*: worldliness in judgment of success or failure; excessive introspection.

This listing of difficulties represents only the negative, not the joyful side of community life. These faults are failings, rooted in original sin, common to all mankind, but magnified in small, closely-confined communities. In conquering these weaknesses religious are purified of selfishness and grow to a perfect love of neighbor.

4. *Against the Vows*

Although faults against poverty and chastity received mention (2% for each) problems in obedience were far

more frequently noted by the sisters (18%). Following are some of their comments:

If I could but remember that obedience will lead to perfection—always!

Our relations with superiors—I think obedience needs a lot of attention in conferences.

The correct attitude towards obedience: prompt, cheerful, universal, and so forth.

How to overcome self-will when you think you should be given a permission and it's refused.

Unwillingness to accept correction (perhaps with the idea that this is intended only for novices); unwillingness to adjust to changes of schedule which are inevitable but which mean giving more of self; failure to realize the importance of conforming one's will to the will of God in the thousand trivial ways that present themselves in the daily life of religious.

A large part of the difficulties regarding obedience stems from the clash of different personalities which, as we have seen, forms a real testing ground in community life:

Supernatural quality of our obedience: seeing Christ in the superior, regardless of personal characteristics.

Superiors sometimes are unavailable or, its opposite, are over-watchful or suspicious.

Avoidance of sarcasm by sisters and respect for superiors. How to act towards those who, to all external appearances, rebel against and criticize those in authority.

Criticism or making comparisons regarding the assignment received, the duty given, or the class to be taught.

Criticism of superiors; loyalty to the community in conversations with priests. I've not heard one priest tell the business of his community or parish to sisters; why should sisters air their little house rule changes?

Difficulty in seeing God's will in the will of superiors, especially if younger.

5. *Against Hope*

As will be seen in the next chapter on emotional problems the "forgotten" virtue of hope is especially important in convents to combat discouragement—a state of mind to

which women seem especially liable to fall prey. Since feelings of inadequacy and self-pity seem to the sufferer to be based upon truth (and even upon humility), these depressing feelings may not even be recognized for what they are: temptations against hope and fortitude. Nevertheless, 14% of the sisters mention discouragement as a fault (a percentage that might be higher if all religious recognized the evil of willful discouragement):

Some sisters need help in overcoming spiritual doldrums and discouragement. Troubles and pessimism; moodiness.

Difficulty of keeping calm under stress; discouragement.

Improper attitudes towards difficulties; need of practical ways of increasing faith and trust.

Following are causes of discouragement offered by the sisters:

Lack of trust in God and neighbor; fear of sickness, breakdown, failure, and so forth.

Discouragement due to lack of sympathy and understanding of some superiors; how to meet pain and understand mental suffering.

Discouragement due to illness, overcrowded classrooms, and weariness.

Inabilities in coping with everyday humdrum; insecurity and, therefore, persecution complexes.

Sisters' own lack of confidence in themselves as potential saints; they should be encouraged to seek direction.

Spiritual remedies for discouragement were likewise mentioned by several sisters:

Self-effacement; the example of the all-perfect public life of Christ; a holy indifference to all that is not God; absolute trust in divine Providence; serenity in work, and calmness when faced with difficulties and with dominating personalities who are without proper authority.

Discouragement is a form of pride. The only sadness is not to be in love with Christ. The trick of getting over sadness is to get right up and pray; be cheerful immediately after a correction; don't interpret motives; be charitable in thought. It's easy to tear down and cause weariness to self, but let's build up and develop a positive outlook.

Acceptance of the crosses of life as they come because they are from him—instead of becoming discouraged.

6. *Against Magnanimity*

The chief fault against magnanimity—and some 6% of the sisters mentioned it—is that of pettiness:

We sometimes become so involved in one little sphere of action that pettiness and immaturity become prevalent.

Pettiness, self-concern, taking things too seriously.

Perhaps too much concentration on things scholastic—a tendency to narrow our horizons to just the school of our community.

One big difficulty is keeping first things first in a busy round of constant duties.

Childishness and immaturity. . . . Worrying too much about getting in the required prayers, reading, and so forth.

Running to the superior about other sisters; I think women are by nature inclined to be petty and need help to become open and “big.”

7. *Against Prudence*

Closely connected with pettiness is lack of prudence, mentioned by about 4% of the sisters. Particularly serious are the resultant problems of formalism and the inability to fuse the active and contemplative lives:

Women are creatures of feeling—convince us that it is the will that counts and not how we feel about things.

In the young: impatience with themselves and others; idealism without prudence.

Inability to face reality. . . . Being narrow, provincial, immature, and formal in our concept of the Christian life and our obligations to acquire perfection in that life.

Lack of perspective and a real sense of values; over-emphasis on the active apostolate to the detriment of a spirit of recollection.

The conflict which, in the twentieth century, exists between novitiate theory and mission practice—stress religious maturity.

The inability of some sisters to fuse the spiritual life with the apostolic life; how to overcome tensions in the religious life in this age.

Sisters must be directed to grow up—to attain emotional maturity. If I would mind my own business all would go well.

Lack of conviction as to our spiritual importance in the world; lack of understanding of the purpose of the customs or of the way in which their observance can help the apostolate.

Difficulties resulting from a vision of life that tends to lose its breadth. Difficulties resulting from a superficial understanding of the total dedication religious life demands.

8. *Against Temperance*

Some 4% of the sisters mention attachment to the pleasures and goods of this world as blocking their progress:

I think sisters need to overcome the materialism that bombards us every day in the classroom; we need to know how to help our children overcome it. We lose sight of our first purpose and expect comforts and favors of lay people.

Lukewarmness and lack of sincerity. . . . A tendency to worldliness and lack of the spirit of sacrifice.

The value of small mortifications cannot be overstressed. We have so many daily opportunities to advance in St. Thérèse's Little Way, but can so easily reject them.

Poverty—many of the sisters are beginning to feel that the more they acquire in the way of material possessions the happier they will be. Some of them don't want to go to certain missions because they won't have the material comforts of other missions.

Aside from all the difficulties mentioned above, several sisters also mention finding it hard to keep patience with unruly children.

But more serious than any of the problems so far mentioned is the basic failure to appreciate fully the religious life itself. This failing no doubt affects only a few individuals, but wherever it exists, it deserves immediate correction:

Dissatisfaction with the religious life itself.

More stress might be placed on developing a greater appreciation of religious life.

The last statement is more or less universally true since we are all apt to forget to some degree the marvelous privilege of being called to the religious life. Our happiness, our gratitude to God, and our spirit of generosity may then grow weak.

The main difficulty may be the tendency to forget that vows mean total consecration. There must be no gradual taking back of that which was given to God.

Contentment with mediocrity.

Lack of sacrifice—we are too much inclined to be soft. Just seems as if the superiors are hotel managers—and get as many complaints (heat, cold, food, clothes).

Failing to remember our privilege in having been called to the religious life; our complacency; worldly tendencies, and general lack of love.

CONCLUSION

This finishes the sisters' report on their faults as they see them. Their account has been frank and honest; it has also necessarily been bleak and one-sided, as any unrelieved listing of faults is bound to be—indicating none of the joy of the life given to God. The complete detailing of these harsher elements should, however, help retreat masters in slanting their conferences to emphasize virtues that will correct the common problems and give to the religious life the complete happiness it should have.

However unpleasant the task, the retreat master, as spiritual physician, must probe the wounds of souls. "Would it not be cruel, for fear of the surgeon's knife, to keep hidden a wound of the body? How much more cruel it is to hide a wound of the soul" (*Rule of St. Augustine*). But, before dropping the scalpel and its cutting edge in favor of positive remedies, we must now search deeper and investigate the causes and cures of suffering within the convent.

IV

EMOTIONAL NEEDS OF THE SISTERS

Since sermons should appeal to the whole person—emotions as well as intellect—the preacher must recognize the emotional needs of his audience. That sisters are aware of this was shown by the fact that the majority placed encouragement at the top of the list (above enlightenment and exhortation) among the purposes of their retreat. Moreover, emotions have a great impact upon the spiritual life itself. St. Francis de Sales believed that, next to sin, disordered sadness is the most destructive enemy of the spiritual life.

Consequently, this chapter is meant to give an insight into the sisters' emotional needs, so that priests can fashion their conferences to combat disordered sadness and encourage the sisters in their spiritual lives. The material here should be especially helpful in working out conferences on hope and fortitude, the virtues most basically involved.

CAUSES OF SUFFERING

The following percentages are compiled from the answers to the question: "What causes sisters their greatest pain and suffering?":

I. The need to know and love God (primarily a spiritual need, of course, but with an overflow into the emotional life):

1. Spiritual hunger44%
2. Inability to combine action and contemplation..25%
3. Worldliness (lack of poverty), hindering one's spiritual life 7%
4. Lack of help from confessors 9%

II. The need for personal perfection, manifested by pain caused by one's failings and weaknesses:

A. Spiritual failings (against which hope and fortitude are especially needed):

1. Discouragement39%
2. Lack of patience16%
3. Lack of prudence (inability to reconcile reality with the ideal)10%
4. Failure to leave everything in God's hands.. 7%
5. Self-pity 4%

B. Natural factors causing the above-mentioned spiritual trials:

a) Physical:

1. Heavy work assignments45%
2. Physical tiredness22%
3. Detailed record keeping 4%
4. Inadequate recreation 4%
5. Extra household duties 2%

b) Psychological trials contributing to spiritual problems:

1. Tension23%
2. Failure to fulfill natural talents, because of the community's lack of interest in the individual as such10%

- | | |
|---|----|
| 3. Lack of variety in annual assignments | 4% |
| 4. Insecurity | 3% |
| 5. Inability to fulfill woman's natural desire
to give life (motherhood) | 3% |
| 6. Lack of opportunity to grow in culture ... | 1% |
- III. The need for friendship with other people (manifested in the pain caused by lack of communication):
- | | |
|---|-----|
| 1. Lack of sisterly understanding | 26% |
| 2. Being hurt by the pride and ambition of others.. | 19% |
| 3. Lack of appreciation and gratitude for work
done | 17% |
| 4. Personal problems with obedience: | |
| a) Lack of understanding in superiors | 16% |
| b) Indiscreet superiors | 7% |
| c) Being delegated responsibility without the
authority to go with it | 5% |
| d) Difficulty of older sisters subjecting them-
selves to younger ones | 2% |
| 5. Loneliness | 12% |
| 6. Demands of the common life | 11% |
| 7. Problem sisters | 7% |
| 8. Worries about one's own personal family | 3% |

Looking over these percentages we are at once struck at seeing that the sisters have far more to say about suffering than in answer to any other question in our survey. Obviously the sisters feel these trials deeply; and they want help. Nevertheless, the large percentage (43%) suffering from discouragement or self-pity indicates that the sisters are not getting the help they need.

Some of these problems—for example, the work load—are beyond the retreat master's competence, but all these trials affect the spiritual life; and the sisters' attitude towards these worries must be the retreat master's concern. Furthermore, he can also alleviate some of the purely natural problems (such as tension) by giving helpful recommendations in his private interviews and by confessional advice.

Notice the extraordinarily high incidence of certain problems: the overwhelming majority of sisters have some emotional problem in getting along with others (a quarter of them are also experiencing difficulties with their superiors); 67% find overwork or being physically tired a problem; 44% experience spiritual hunger; 25% worry at the difficulty of combining action and prayer; and a remarkably large 23% find nervous tension a problem.

We now turn to the sisters' own comments on some of these causes of suffering.

1. Spiritual Hunger (44%)

Most of us want to be holy. Perhaps the one single thing that causes most suffering is the distance between the ideal and performance—the need to be told of God's love.

The basis of pain and suffering is definitely the lack of purity of intention—which is not acquired overnight. Preaching on this subject would aid each sister, as there is, no doubt, a sampling of too much work, spiritual hunger, and discouragement sitting before each retreat master.

Though I have been burning and boiling inside for some years I still have a great desire for perfection and intimate union.

Perhaps the most acute suffering of a religious sincerely striving after perfection is the realization that her human nature and self-love often stand in the way of the complete sacrifice she offered and vowed to God.

Spiritual hunger; lack of supernatural outlook; not seeing Christ as a real person.

As for spiritual hunger I can only speak for myself. Having lived with other sisters for years, I think some of us at least must have had the same experiences. Please understand that I do not say these things in a critical way . . . but it seems to me that the beginning of our training places more emphasis on keeping the rule, and the like, and not enough on the spiritual life or its connexion with it. In other words, I feel we are not deep enough to have a real spiritual hunger (some do, of course). But when this hunger for things of the spirit does come, either through grace or sound training, we

are held back by pettiness. How to rise above it—that is the question.

One of the causes of this spiritual hunger seems to be a lack of spiritual direction which leads to confusion or, worse yet, to discouragement:

Lack of spiritual direction, without which anyone is easy prey to discouragement. Work, heavy schedules, etc., are only the proximate causes of difficulties in the spiritual life. Perhaps it can be safely stated that it is rather the kind of work, not the amount, that creates problems (i.e., where aptitude and age are not taken into consideration in assignments, opportunity for recreation, etc.). When these and other irritations press heavily, a sister sometimes reaches the point where she can no longer pull herself up by her own bootstraps, as the saying goes. Every problem is magnified and the whole thing gets far out of proportion. If she is not in the habit of seeking guidance, she will perhaps refrain from doing so even when it is needed, through fear of appearing to seek sympathy. Such timidity can result in much harm. Spiritual direction should come, I feel, not just from the confessional but through conferences, recollection days, and possibly from interviews with superiors. All this is done in some places, but I have yet to hear of an ideal arrangement.

Bring out the importance of spiritual direction or guidance. Make it a means of perfection to be looked up to, not down upon. As I write this I'm thinking of a sister I met last year. One weekend she told me she was going back to her motherhouse to make profession. I was so surprised that she wasn't in retreat in preparation for the occasion, so I asked, "For how long do you make profession, sister?" She answered with a sort of sad smile, "It's to be for life!" I was speechless. How could you promise to live a life in religion by just catching a train, repeating a formal prayer and signing a statement! As it turned out, the sister was deeply troubled and in doubt about the thing she was about to do. . . . To this day I wonder if she made her profession. . . . That's a sample of one who should have had help from a good source and got none.

The ordinary source of direction is, of course, the confessional; here, again, a surprisingly large 9% thought that

the lack of help they get in confession is a major trial in the religious life:

Hurry in getting through with confessions and other exercises. Fear of going to the ordinary confessor, who may be unapproachable and prone to make severe accusations.

Never rush the sisters, especially in their confession, please!

2. Inability to Combine Active and Contemplative Lives (25%)

With younger sisters I think it's the discouragement arising from not knowing how properly to balance their spiritual life and their active life. For those of us in the active apostolate, failure to keep first things first; letting the life of Martha destroy that of Mary, instead of letting one complement and fortify the other.

Sisters who earnestly desire growth in holiness can become quite frustrated by the race for professional competency together with the spiritual obligations. There should be a proper balance; work load can be a serious problem.

Help us foster a spirit of recollection, Father. If we can learn this early, it can see us through many trials.

Frustration in maintaining a balance between "religious teacher" and "teaching religious"; professional demands upon us increase and cause real dilemmas; educating the young is tedious, exacting, and often discouraging.

I think young religious find life hard because being a good religious seems to be equated with being a good teacher. The frustration of trying to be good at both, with not enough time for either, is a real cross. We whittle away at our vows and take back, a little at a time, our initial offering of self. We grow away from that formative spirit of our novitiate and need to be reminded of our ideals. We are influenced by human respect, by the crowd, and sometimes we lack the courage to be saints—a contest with mediocrity.

3. Worldliness (7%)

Some sisters mentioned worldliness within their convents as a source of pain to themselves personally. This pain

can be taken as a sign of spiritual hunger, yearning for the greater perfection of the community:

The worldliness which seems to be ever increasing in our convents, yet goes unchecked.

Members of the community who perhaps give scandal to lay people by their actions, wishes expressed, purchases.

You might hit at worldliness which not only has its foot in the door—it's in! We are getting too independent. The tradition of "our" room, "our" book, and so forth, is so seldom used in speaking anymore. "Our" is now "my" iron, my board, my typewriter. It's getting so now we "need" hand-carved statues, and the like, to decorate our cell. Only the best will do. Believe me, people in the world are making more sacrifices because of need; we are not making them, by choice. And the strange paradox is they admire us because they think we are so penitential!

We should expect to find these complaints about worldliness in response to the question about the faults the sisters need help in overcoming, but the intensity of their feelings is reflected in that the above remarks were answers to the question, "What causes the most suffering?"

4. *Discouragement (39%) and Self-pity (4%)*

Discouragement, especially for the young sister, when efforts to attain results are not realized.

The constant regularity of the feeling of discouragement.

The awareness of a personal failure to measure up to the call of grace.

We are supposed to grow in perfection as we grow older, but the reverse seems to be true. As we grow older we ask more favors, expect to be pampered, become more selfish instead of selfless.

Lack of spiritual hunger as you grow older; discouragement.

Note that nearly half the sisters questioned are troubled by temptations to discouragement or self-pity. An unrelied temptation of this kind can affect a sister's life of prayer, her work, and even her vocation. Surely, this is

one trial that the retreat master can counteract by a conference on hope or fortitude.

5. *Lack of Prudence (10%)*

Unnecessary loss of time and poor organization.

In the young it's hard at first to reconcile ideals presented with actual life, whether one is given the expected example or not.

In the young, the conflicts one meets in regard to time and all that one wants and has to do.

Discouragement, work (too much), and spiritual hunger all three of these cause suffering—plus a real confusion resulting from an inability to accomplish all that one's spiritual duties and the duties of state require because of a lack of sufficient time. The time is even more limited because of so many extracurricular demands. There is a conflict between what one sees as the ideal religious and what seems to be demanded of one to keep in the good graces of superiors. I don't mean this to sound cynical or discontented, but it is a real problem for many, particularly younger sisters, and they need help in finding a reasonable solution for themselves. Lack of perspective and a real sense of values; overemphasis of the active apostolate to the detriment of the spirit of recollection.

Weekly confession is another bugbear for most of us. I'm sure it's because we aren't going about it in the right way.

Mental strain—would you please explain the qualities of a good, correct conscience; distinguish temptation, passions, emotions.

Inability to face reality cheerfully, sanely, and with the realization that God builds on the human; lack of spiritual direction.

One great area of stress is the failure to find the proper balance between the work and prayer life of religious. There is no need for this if the training given is integrated. The reason why the Church has approved a certain group is for its apostolate. All rules start out by stating that their main purpose is the glory of God and sanctification of its members. But what is so often overlooked is that, immediately following the statement of "for the sanctification of its members," is the mode of it, that is, by means of such and such works of mercy

undertaken in a particular spirit and manner. That is the reason the group exists as far as the Church is concerned. All this implies plenty of thought and work to instill the proper sense of values in view of the special end of the group. Values are the mainspring of motivation, and only when motivation is solidly based on Scripture, dogma, and the liturgy, in the spirit of the founder's or foundress's life and thought, will the real and special "brand" of sanctity emerge to justify the group's existence in the Church.

6. *Excessive Work (45%) and Fatigue (22%)*

Taken together these two causes of suffering afflict most (67%) of the sisters. Consequently, their attitude towards hard working conditions has a vital impact upon the spiritual life of most convents. The following quotations give a valuable insight into the amount of work the sisters must perform—and, above all, their reaction to it:

These last years the work load is very heavy; teaching is harder every year; much is demanded of the teachers as extracurricular, and they have much housework, since all communities seem to be in need of housekeepers.

Work, work, work, and just when you're ready to explode, in comes the inspector with new suggestions for what to do after school and on that empty free day, Saturday.

The work load, as unrelated to the spiritual life; how to make it serve instead of hinder; lack of specific concern in superiors for our spiritual interests as compared with their solicitude for our efficiency at our other work.

Most of the sisters have more work than they can do in the time allotted. I think this is one of the things that disturbs many of them. They love their work, but they do not have the time needed to do justice to it.

Work load—the long loneliness aggravated by assembly-line superiors.

Heavy responsibilities for which we are, at times, unprepared; heavy work load and the resulting discouragement and depression upon realizing that we cannot do all things well, because the day has just twenty-four hours.

Spiritual hunger and the lack of consideration for the sister's physical, as well as professional, capabilities.

Fatigue is a great source of suffering for me. I have great hopes that someday I'll be able to pray without falling asleep.

Each year more is demanded of teachers. It seems that so many of us are under tension, which is the cause of so much sickness. If we would just learn to leave everything in the hands of God and not be thinking of ourselves, we would be so much healthier.

Failure of superiors to recognize physical illness or exhaustion. Some recognize virtue only in those who can continually work, either because they are blessed with good health, or because they physically drive themselves beyond what would normally be expected of them. This not only causes physical suffering but . . . fails to remove the loneliness of life.

The work—never having time enough. Impatience and tensions follow; then discouragement.

The constant strain of keeping up with all the minutiae of record-keeping, testing, conferences, and reports that are required in the field of education today can make us tense, irritable, or discouraged. How do we keep this work from taking precedence over prayer and union with God?

Some of our missions are very hard because of the limited number of sisters. However, there is no limit to a class enrollment. The sisters must take the number of pupils assigned, which is seldom under forty-five, and try to accomplish the impossible. In such a situation the sisters may have nobody to turn to for advice or encouragement. The superiors are teaching and must conform to the pastor's or state inspector's whims. The Mother General is too far away, and if a letter is written, it will not be recognized without a superior's signature—which brings us right back where we started from. This is hard on the young sister, especially if she is not firm in her convictions of working for Christ. Then too, the older sister is expected to carry the same schedule. There are a few compensations made, but in many cases the burden could and should be lightened.

To add to the problem, many of our missions do not have a domestic sister. In most cases this work falls on the teaching sisters. It is no joke preparing a meal for some 15, 20, or 30 people and then rushing into a classroom with a smile and all the patience in the world.

Remember, the sisters do their own sewing, washing, and ironing, besides teaching and living the religious life.

Frustration due to overwork is a problem. Religious should have plenty to do, but this business of having the teachers in the kitchen much of the time is bad.

Some sisters also remark that overwork is aggravated by lack of knowledge in the field they are to teach:

Being placed in positions and given duties for which we are inadequately prepared.

The work insofar as we are overburdened and are insecure because of lack of training and education (I am referring here especially to the older sisters and not the ones who are in the new sister-formation training—lucky them).

This can be further aggravated by lack of recreation:

There isn't enough recreation, and all work and no play makes Jill a dull girl.

A seven-day work week with very limited time for recreation and leisurely reading.

Other sisters mention that lack of proper food and other physical necessities compounds the problem:

Sometimes inadequate meals. Superiors should have a conference on consideration for the sick—even for sisters sick for a few days—and on the importance of giving proper food to the community, plus a treat now and then.

Lay teachers could give us more help in the overcrowded schools (I know this is a practical difficulty of finance, availability, and so forth, but it certainly would help).

And last, here are two perceptive insights into the problem of overwork:

I really think sisters like to work. I know that even though the load gets heavier instead of lighter, the satisfaction in our work is keen. On the other hand, prayers are missed (not voluntarily) or are poorly made up (too busy). Distractions are legion; and it is very difficult to become recollected, much less stay that way. Are we becoming professionals, *first?* When I die, I'm sure our Lord isn't going to be interested in how many associations our school is an approved member of. But right now classes are always getting more attention than the inner life.

The work load is really heavier than most persons realize. However, I find that it is easier to bear at some convents than at others depending upon the atmosphere of the particular community with which one lives. The attitudes of those with whom we live have a great influence on everything we do.

7. *The Psychological Factor of Tension (23%)*

Nearly a quarter of the sisters—a remarkably large number—mention tension as being a source of suffering:

Weariness—physical, but also emotional because of conflict (which is not real but results from misunderstanding) between apostolate and religious life; sense of unfulfillment, not realizing how the desires of profession day can be realized through more love rather than through more work; loneliness within the community; tension involved in overloaded schedule; lack of spiritual direction (so many mention this!); we also lack the opportunity to talk things out, and to be accepted while doing so, with superiors (not all, of course).

I believe that retreat masters should have a practical knowledge of *Mental Health and Hygiene* and similar books. Too much stress is given to living the supernatural and taking the natural life for granted.

That midyear slump (January and February) when one's lid is about ready to blow off every other second. By that time of year the job, the community, the house, and so forth, have become oldshoe and sometimes give rise to difficult walking.

Failure of superiors to recognize mental disease, and a lack of understanding of the individual during and following her illness. When mental disease is present and those responsible seem blind to it, the victim's pain is intense, but, in addition, pain is given to those who live with this individual; everyone is on edge: those who do not recognize the illness present, as well as those who do recognize it but are powerless to see that treatment is given.

8. *Lack of Interest in Individual's Talents and Work (10%)*

Lack of respect for the individuality of sisters; overwork; and lack of opportunities to grow in culture.

The inability of some to make use of those abilities they have, through the jealousy of others.

Sisters will accept overwork as a matter of course if they are only given a little recognition as persons with ideas. Being treated as a possible source of ideas or being given a chance to express even a little of themselves gives them a part in the work and makes them responsible persons. Take this away and you prevent a real opportunity for character growth. Discouragement may result from a feeling that a sister is the answer to a teacher-money shortage and, as a woman and a religious, she should be a well-intentioned but rather naive peg to be ordered into any hole open. Sisters just aren't the dumb little innocents of Kelley's *Two Little Nuns* vintage.

It is difficult being a domestic in a community that teaches; since we are not teachers, superiors do not understand the needs we have for our work. Their concern is at a high pitch for teachers, but domestic work does not hold their interest and is allowed to struggle along as best it can. Superiors admire our work, even at times say, "It is perfect," but it seems to be just so many words. They have no concept of the time it takes to do a perfect job at work that is for the most part hand-work, of its tediousness, or of its strain on the nerves.

Everything is done to give the teacher a good education with modern equipment and all that is necessary for her to become a good teacher. Superiors understand their needs, because that is the work they themselves have done. Naturally enough, for us who have not had the advantage of higher education, another difficulty is a feeling of inadequateness in presenting problems to the superior. When presenting a problem, we feel her lack of interest; usually our problem dies on her desk. We are, of course, a very small minority and, when education is the big thing, we are truly step-children. The hurt is keen.

9. Lack of Sisterly Understanding (26%)

This category, and all the following, concern the hurts caused by others, in or out of the community. As might be guessed, because of woman's natural desire (and need) to love and be loved, these pains caused by unhappy interpersonal relations are, in their aggregate, the most frequently mentioned:

Lack of understanding and mutual sympathy by fellow religious.

Being misunderstood, passed over. Lack of real effort to talk over a problem and settle it. If you do try to talk it out, getting punished with a velvet glove.

On a natural plane, lack of appreciation, misunderstanding; lack of consideration on the part of superiors; a feeling of rejection after an "experience," and aloneness.

Some sisters have the wrong idea of charity. Sometimes a clash in personalities upsets them tremendously. Guidance along these lines would help.

Inability to take in their stride the petty grievances, misunderstandings, and the like, which are bound to be met with in a life lived as close to one another as is religious life.

Lack of fraternal understanding and/or lack of understanding by superiors. Pride, ambition, and absence of simplicity in community relationships in general.

Some 19% of the sisters concur in stating that the last fault mentioned, the *pride* and *ambition* of a few, causes suffering in some communities.

10. *Lack of Appreciation for Work Done (17%)*

Lack of appreciation; being shoved into the back place repeatedly; lack of opportunity to talk over difficulties with an understanding superior.

Misunderstanding and no recognition of work well done; others preferred to them. Sermons or conferences during the year will really help us—not just a delivery on a pious subject for half an hour.

The young need help and encouragement, honest praise for their efforts, no nagging or overwork, proper diversion, kindly admonition for faults; they are expected in turn to be well-mannered and to defer to authority.

Failure to receive occasional praise for hard work; work from morning till night, but no one bothers to thank us.

Criticism (unfavorable); lack of sympathy with the suffering of others. We are too busy with our own problems and tend to overlook or slight the suffering of others.

A little thanks.

I really don't believe it is the work load that causes discouragement—I think it is the lack of understanding and appreciation. The knowledge that we are looked upon as mere "tools," thoughtlessly discarded when no longer useful. This casting aside is encountered with lay people and pastors more than fellow religious.

11. Sufferings Caused by Obedience (30%)

Lack of understanding of superiors; lack of understanding among subjects.

Indiscreet superiors; this suffering is more intense when the convent is without a confessor willing to be helpful to the sisters.

Living under a stern superior; having the responsibility but not the corresponding authority of an assignment.

The misunderstandings of superiors; but these are frequently the "infirmities" of religious life, and retreatants need encouragement in working out such difficulties.

I feel it is the distrust of superiors—the unwillingness of major superiors to investigate the cause of a general unhappiness in a house. Personal worries about spiritual progress which arise because superiors resent subjects going out to confession, though the subject is aware that she is permitted by Canon Law to confess to whomever she pleases (when necessary). Still, when the sister knows that the result may be unpleasant for herself, and the community subjected to the resultant displeasure of the superior, she is hesitant about asking for permission.

Changes that are hard to take; not having the work they like to do best or for which they feel they are fitted.

I have been in houses where the retreat master came and went without gaining any knowledge he could use to improve the situations that were present, such as a house divided between superior and subjects or between the superior's clique and others; individuals not speaking; sisters having to get two permissions for one duty, for example, from the superior in charge of the house and from the principal of the school. When these two rulers clash, subjects are the victims. The principal wants you to attend P.T.A. meeting to show gratitude for the work the parents are doing; the superior wants you home and in bed at the regular time.

More sympathy and understanding on the part of superiors.

12. *Loneliness* (12%)

Loneliness—in the sense of having no one to ask for advice or encouragement. I think here the remedy should be in learning to rely more completely on God. How can that attitude be developed specifically?

Lack of feeling that they can talk things over with someone. Many sisters are reticent in seeking personal help and advice.

Lack of opportunity for relaxation or just plain fun; loneliness in spite of being constantly with other people; the instinct for motherhood and the longing to love and be loved by another human being doesn't die with the vow of chastity, but should be used and supernaturalized. I think sisters often forget that a life of chastity must necessarily be a life involving a certain amount of loneliness. The One she loves cannot be reached by the senses. Living by faith in the knowledge that she is loved by her divine Spouse even though she does not "feel" she is, is not easy and may, at times, lead to discouragement.

13. *Common Life and Its Demands* (11%)

Community living—at once the biggest cross and the greatest joy.

Sisters who are too independent; and who try to revolutionize a mission the first time they are sent to it.

Daily annoyances and frustrations in dealing with children and others; misunderstanding, partiality, coldness, and lack of encouragement when best efforts are being made.

One of the most painful causes of suffering to sisters is jealousy on the part of certain individuals. Believe me, such persons can make a veritable inferno for the victim or victims, as the case may be. They make mean remarks every time the victim gets some little praise or recognition. They are suspicious of all her actions and question everything she does. Frequently, they go to the superior with false stories about their victim just to see that she will no longer be in her good graces. They

accuse their fellow sister of things she didn't do. Usually she is unaware of the accusations and, consequently, is unable to defend herself. I have had such a thing happen to me and have seen it happen to others.

Daily misunderstandings; pettiness; lack of imagination and means of varying recreation, thus causing poor mental attitudes.

The presence of a bad family spirit on a mission.

From experience with our own and other communities (I have stayed at many houses) there is an exterior that shows the good, humble, happy sister. When you get inside you sometimes find what you see outside, but in too many cases you find resentment, spiritual hunger, and discouragement. Many sisters feel that they are just numbers. As we grow older and lose our parents, we feel a greater need for affection from our sisters. Maybe it's the increased rat-race, but kindness is short (no time—too busy). Recreation discourages talking, now that we have TV. Even though our superior says that no one may complain about the noise of sisters talking during a program, conversation is dampened, and we are easily lulled into watching the next Western.

Among the problems with community life are included some serious accusations about injustice—which pertain to obedience, as well:

Unwieldy amount of work given to the able and willing, leaving them little time for prayer.

Favoritisms and injustice.

Many sisters feel that you are at their service, even requisitioning you for their own private projects.

Production-line superiors—they are people whose main idea is to get things done (their way) without thought of cost to the ones doing it. They can easily pass out jobs and sit around and watch others work and criticize the work. They forget to be human; to realize that someone else may have a few good, workable ideas and to appreciate what is done. As soon as one job is done, you are given another. The religious under them are treated as machines to accomplish work. There is little cheer living under them. They forget that subjects get sick and tired, and need to relax and do things for themselves once in a while.

CONCLUSION

So ends this recital of pain. Many of these sufferings manifestly have a terrific impact on the spiritual life, and a good retreat or monthly conference can and must help resolve the more common emotional trials that are capable of a partly supernatural solution. As several sisters remark:

Discouragement can be difficult for religious, but selfishness and lack of pure intention and love, cause the most pain and suffering.

Suffering is caused by sister's humanity—the weakness of human nature: primarily, by her unkindness and uncharitableness. These weaknesses, in turn, are due to lack of spiritual depth and growth. Her shallowness may be caused by rejection of grace, lack of supernatural guidance, or activism vs. the contemplative life, with the latter lost in a whirl of zeal.

Several sisters, with many years of religious experience, were also kind enough to indicate the different emotional problems for various age groups:

As a young religious, I believe a sister's greatest suffering comes from her trying to conform to reality, when reality falls short of youthful ideals. As an older religious, I believe her suffering may come from the subtle influence of worldliness.

As young religious, lack of success in the apostolate for fear of failure and consequent adverse criticism. As older religious, apparent lack of progress spiritually—the feeling of urgency and the lack of time.

It just depends on what age level you are addressing. For the very young I would say not being able to exercise their zeal as they feel they should (lack of experience sometimes makes their actions rash); having no one with whom they can talk over their problems, or discuss the spiritual life.

After twelve years or so in the religious life fervor has cooled a great deal and the sisters start feeling physically and spiritually exhausted. They suffer from a lack of understanding by older sisters and begin to feel as though perhaps they were missing something in their state of life; and here discouragement can begin to set in if the mind has not been set definitely towards God. The devil from here on can use this as a lead to temptations to give up the spiritual life.

After about twenty years the work pressure really makes itself felt. This sometimes leads to excessive self-pity and turning towards creature comforts. The sisters feel they haven't really advanced in the spiritual life and wonder if it was worth all the sacrifices made.

For the older sisters I think perhaps it is the lack of appreciation for all that they have done that causes their greatest suffering. Naturally, in all these periods there is spiritual aridity to contend with; and very often, a confessor is assigned who does not understand religious women and who can give one very little help when it is needed.

For a young religious I think disedification is a major problem; for older religious, obedience is hard, particularly when they are asked to obey superiors much younger than they and who are not experienced in their particular field of work.

The priest can do nothing about the purely physical aspects of the work load and loneliness, but he can do a great deal to help the sisters form the right spiritual attitude towards these trials. He must do it, for it is precisely by suffering these trials—the individual crosses God has shaped for their shoulders—that the sisters will become one with their bridegroom, Christ—and him crucified.

V

TOPICS DESIRED

The two previous chapters considered the moral subjects the sisters felt they *needed* to hear about by reason of their faults and emotional needs. This chapter deals with the topics the sisters *want* to hear about and includes doctrinal subjects. The following results were taken from their answers to the question: "What specific topics would you like to hear conferences on; what subjects should be stressed?"

In order of popularity, these are the topics the sisters want:

1. Charity	70%
2. Virtues (not specified)	51%
3. Vows (not specified)	46%
4. Obedience	44%
5. Chastity	42%
6. Poverty	37%
7. Prayer	36%
8. The Spiritual Life	32%
9. Faith	28%
10. Community Life	28%
11. Hope	25%

12. Confession	22%
13. The Mass	21%
14. The Holy Eucharist	20%
15. Fortitude	20%
16. Christ	16%
17. Temperance (including pride)	16%
18. Indwelling	16%
19. Mary	15%
20. The Apostolate	14%
21. The Sacraments (not specified)	11%
22. Combining Action and Contemplation..	10%
23. Rules and Constitutions	10%
24. Justice	9%
25. Spiritual Direction	9%
26. Prudence	8%
27. Grace	7%
28. Gifts of Holy Spirit	7%
29. The Bible (especially N.T.)	7%
30. God	6%
31. Purity of Heart	4%
32. Holy Spirit	3%
33. Heaven	2%
34. Death	2%

At once we notice that charity is far out in front as the favorite topic for conferences. This reinforces our findings in the two previous chapters where the sisters list lack of charity as their main failing, and the uncharitableness of others as third among those things causing them to suffer.

In general, the sisters want to hear about:

- a) All three theological virtues, each of them high on list of desired topics (charity [1st], faith [10th], and hope [11th]).
- b) All three vows, with obedience a slight favorite;
- c) The spiritual life and the life of prayer;
- d) Confession, the Mass, and Holy Communion.

Notice, furthermore, that all these are more or less practical subjects. The purely doctrinal topics are well down the list (but, as we have seen, the sisters want to see the doctrinal implications underlying these practical matters). Thus, a regular pattern emerges: the favorite topics are those we study in ascetical and mystical theology; in short, the sisters want to know how to advance in the spiritual life.

Retreat masters should notice that the sisters do not seem to want sermons on heaven, death, judgment, or hell—apparently they feel they have heard enough about them. Note, too, the low priority given to conferences on our Lord (16th) and his Mother (19th). We may disagree with the lack of emphasis given to certain subjects (for example, the mystical body), but, if our own favorite topics are low on the list, we at least know where we have to stir up interest.

GENERAL TOPICS

Following are the sisters' own comments on the topics they want to hear about (only, this time, the listing of subjects will be logical, rather than in the order of popularity).

1. *The Spiritual Life* (32%)

Following are the comments of the sisters who want to hear more about spiritual perfection—their purpose in entering the religious life:

Place lofty ideals and the wonders and beauties of the spiritual life before your hearers.

Tell us what we can expect as we advance in the spiritual life. If we knew, perhaps it would be easier to take.

We want the supernatural—but specifically how to live the life of faith in our particular environment. Is it too late for the older "retarded" religious to learn the spiritual life?

What progress have I made since my last retreat?

On the interior life—please, several conferences.

We have a path in life; tell us how to live and pray well; we have freely chosen this path; tell us its purpose, rewards, and difficulties—how to persevere in it. No extra devotions.

2. *Grace* (7%)

Immediately connected with the spiritual life is grace, which gives us a share in the life of God himself (10% of the novices also requested this topic):

Instruct us in the theology of grace.

Even though a certain theological foundation is necessary, spend by far the greater amount of time on practical means for acquiring and growing in grace.

Practical applications of the role of grace to one's particular work; for example, the role grace plays in making us better teachers.

3. *Indwelling of the Trinity* (16%)

With grace the Holy Trinity comes to live in our souls (some 23% of the novices wished to hear about this subject):

Devotion to the Holy Spirit within.

Practice of the presence of God in spite of the distractions and pressure of daily work.

God's personal presence and personal love for me—convince me. What it means to be united in love with God. The ways to achieve this union ever more completely. The hindrances to this union and the ways to overcome them.

4. *The Virtues* (51%)

Without going into detail, about half the sisters (and 19% of the novices) asked for conferences on the virtues:

Any of the virtues of the apostolic life.

A treatment of the faults which are common to many of us—motivation for striving to overcome them. Stress the opposite virtues, for example, lack of preparedness to enter upon exercises with recollected spirit; being instant in prayer and prompt in answering bells that call sisters to community exercises, and so forth.

How to live our daily lives in the practice of the moral virtues, because these are the problems we have difficulty with. These are the things that hit home more.

The idea that virtue will be manifested in each individual according to his or her own particular God-given nature.

Virtues, especially those which are less discussed, for example, justice, and their application to everyday living.

The virtues of the vows as distinguished from the vows themselves.

5. *Charity* (70%)

Charity was easily the most popular topic for conferences (among novices, too, with 67%). Dividing this large subject we arrive at the following sub-headings under charity:

Community Life	28%
Love of God	23%
God's love for us	21%
Understanding	21%
Unselfishness	12%
Love of neighbor	11%
Kindness	10%
Putting up with problem sisters	8%
Joy and peace	3%

Following are the sisters' own comments on these topics:

a) Love of God and God's Love for Us

That God loves me with all my temperamental faults and wants me to love Him and to share his life now and in eternity.

We need to be told of God's love for us.

I want to be reminded of the love of Christ for me as I strive to renew my realization of this love and begin anew to love him as he deserves.

Emphasis should be placed on love as the motivating factor.

Of God's love for me personally—convince me!

Love of Christ for sinners.

Love of God, what it is. How to apply it during all the hours of the day and in all duties.

As the retreat theme I should like to hear the love of the Lord for each of us stressed as the prime motivation.

Love of God—it can help us with the impossible tasks.

Since sanctity in anyone is in proportion to his or her surrender or total acceptance of God's proffered love (to let oneself be loved by God, consent to it) then some time might be spent on showing the sisters that feminine psychology is an aid, and a great one, in this regard. The reason for lack of this kind of surrender is our deep fear or insecurity which might better be expressed as a lack of trust in God's love for us. We are so afraid of getting hurt, of losing something, we can't let ourselves go into the arms of God, trusting him all the way. Yet our sanctity is dependent upon our doing this very thing. God's glory is to love, pour out; ours is to make ourselves emptier and emptier to receive his outpourings.

The nothingness of myself—the great debt of love and service to him who is everything.

Unselfishness—a generous giving of the life we receive from Christ—a fulfillment of our need as women to give life; our bridehood with Christ—again a fulfillment of our womanhood.

Something inspiring about the love of God; the thought, "God loves me."

The idea of God as real, so that we will develop a personal love of God.

Let love and not fear be emphasized. So often one comes out of a retreat entirely mixed up.

Since woman was created by God to be the heart of her family, it is little wonder that love is what she wishes to hear most about. The wise retreat master or conference speaker recognizes that woman's basic natural need is to love and be loved, and he lifts it into the supernatural order where she can love God and realize that God loves her. If this does not take place the sister will become quickly discouraged. Thus, for women, charity is both the most needed and the most appealing subject he can preach on.

b) Community life and Love of Community (28%)

Although charity should be the strongest virtue, nevertheless, humanly speaking, there are always problems when

many live together. Here are the sisters' comments on this thorny subject:

The difference between interest in the community and just "sour grapes" criticism.

An integration of a life of charity—love of God informing everything and expressed in love of neighbor. The religious order or congregation derives its life from its insertion into the life of the Church. . . . The Church is not the one honored; the group is. Then why the insistence or mentality that is present, namely, constantly harping on benefits for the congregation, instead of the benefits for the Church.

The necessity of keeping up the amenities of social or community life. The friendly give-and-take.

A subject in most need of attention is community loyalty and respect for other communities. By community I mean the house in which the sister is living, and the sisters she lives with—be they four or twenty-four. Because we are dedicated religious we have, over and above our obligations as social beings, the added duty to the community in which we live. Our community is our family. Perhaps we do not always recall the seriousness of that family bond. If we really saw our mission as a family, how could we then stoop to the pettiness, the insincerities, that sometimes mar and nullify our work? To live in a tiny world, in a house ruled by petty jealousies is a terrible contradiction—it is a lie. For we cannot call the community our family and live as strangers. It's important to remember that every house is the congregation in miniature.

We need to be loyal because the honor of the community or order, and ultimately the Church, rests in the hands and lips of every member of the community. Perhaps some sisters never think of their criticism as an expression of disloyalty; perhaps it is covered with the mask of "frankness," but it is disloyalty all the same. To make reparation for all our breaches of loyalty we must make the community become for us more important than our own ambitions, our own preferences, our own dislikes; otherwise we are failing our community, the Church, and ourselves. We should know we're to be sanctified through our community, always remembering what a wonderful force for good a community can be when its members close ranks, resolve differences, and work in that harmony which the word "community" implies! I honestly believe, with all my heart and soul,

that happiness is to be had from true community love. And with that happiness come peace, joy, and a deep love of God and his Mother and all those waiting for us in heaven.

- c) Love of Neighbor (11%), Understanding (21%), and Kindness (10%)

You will remember that the sisters placed lack of charity at the top of their list of faults. Little wonder then, that many repeat their desire for conferences on sisterly charity in replying to the question on what subjects they *want* to hear; charity is *the* popular subject:

Since you asked, I will tell you that I think the least practiced virtue in many convents is charity. There is much more uncharitable talk in convents than there ever should be.

Charity, the virtue whose practice makes a convent like heaven, and whose omission makes a convent like hell.

Praise of others' work (we want it for our own).

Help us to develop a sense of balance. How do we balance others' temperaments, backgrounds, and positions vs. our own conflicting viewpoints; over-familiarity vs. cold reserve with others; brutal frankness vs. beating around the bush; flagrant criticism vs. silence when necessity demands speech.

I think points on charity and sisterliness can't be stressed too much.

The "Little Way" of St. Thérèse—charity in little things.

A psychological need of the present time, it seems to me, is that of better communications among religious themselves and between the religious and the seculars with whom they deal. This is important to stress since its absence causes so much emotional frustration that it is an obstacle to union with God and love of neighbor.

- d) Putting Up with Problem Sisters (8%)

Intimately connected with love of neighbor is the seventh spiritual work of mercy: "Putting up with difficult people":

Aids to knowing oneself and others we live with—understanding of different temperaments.

If there were some way to make "whole personalities" understand those many religious with psychoneurotic personalities—how to act towards them and their reactions.

Aim some conferences at the disjointed personality types to get them to a point where possibly they would seek guidance or more of it than they do.

Being in psychiatry we have noted in many communities the lack of understanding in supposedly intelligent superiors. A world of good could come from helping religious understand mental illness better. To be mentally ill is much more hurtful to the sister than to the lay person, because she is not only aware of what her own family will think, but also, and what is more important, what her community thinks—this does not help in her recovery. Understanding is an essential element of help.

e) Joy and Peace (3%), the Effects of Charity

Learn to smile and accept cheerfully the little inconveniences and annoyances of daily life.

Religious should be joyful and show it.

With daily Holy Communion there cannot be a sad religious. Joy should be reflected in her soul and body.

6. *Hope* (25%)

Twenty-two per cent of those sisters requesting conferences on hope specified that they were speaking of acceptance of God's will and abandonment to it. (Of the novices only 10% requested sermons on hope.) Following are typical comments:

Accepting all that comes to us as the will of God.

What causes those days when prayer seems to do no good?

Abandonment to God (the price of sanctity) lies, not in achieving, but in surrender within the framework which God has set around us.

7. *Faith* (28%)

Conferences about our faith, that it may be strengthened.

The mystery of any kind of suffering can only be answered in the light of faith. Women should know that suffering is inevitable.

We must learn how to make faith live.

I think the greatest need for our sisters is a deeper knowledge of the truths of the faith—those truths which can be a source of so much peace and consolation. This knowledge, or rather, this realization can come only from frequent prayerful pondering of the truths of revelation.

8. *Prayer* (36%)

Problems of prayer formed the seventh most popular topic of retreat conferences. Subdividing this topic we arrive at the following percentages:

Particular examen	13%
Mental prayer	11%
Meditation	11%
How to combine action and contemplation	10%
Recollection	8%
Silence	4%
Spiritual reading	4%
Office	1%
Rosary	1%

Of particular interest is the small number requesting sermons on the Rosary. As might be expected a larger number of the novices (21%) wanted a talk explaining silence, while 30% wished to hear more about meditation. Following are comments of the professed:

The hidden life amid the rush and bustle of the active life.

The synthesis of prayer and action.

Suggestions should be given on how to make the daily meditation more profitable.

Advanced prayer.

Recollection; the different ways to make mental prayer.

Growth in the spiritual life through the use of the particular examen, daily examination of conscience, trials of community life, putting up with problem sisters, mental prayer—practical suggestions, please.

I would like to hear more on mental prayer, making it clear that effort alone is not sufficient, that grace is the final element.

Ways of overcoming the many distractions around one.

How can we coordinate our spiritual and active lives in these times when there are so many demands on religious?

The most painful and difficult prayer is also the most profitable.

When we go to pray we go to give.

How to pray.

9. *Prudence* (8%)

Intellect should dominate emotions	4%
Maturity	3%
Good conscience	1%

None of us can undo our mistakes; the best we can do is repent and learn by them.

Patience with oneself.

How to strive for ideals with your feet on the ground.

Immaturity often seems to be the basis for many difficulties and faults, such as pettiness, self-pity, and unkindnesses.

I long to regain perspective.

What to do when you feel you are suffering from fear and anxiety about temptations.

Good use of time.

Developing a balance between accepting and seeking relief from a disagreeable situation; tension and over-relaxation in one's work; levity and morbidity; neglect and over-solicitude for one's well-being.

Intellect and will should dominate emotions and not vice versa.

Fear of sickness, breakdown, failure, tension, and so forth.

Taking things too seriously when it isn't necessary to do so.

I don't think sisters have enough clear-cut ideas on spiritual matters. I think the younger sisters are better informed than the older ones. We need balance. Too much emotion and not enough intellect.

10. *Justice* (9%)

Our responsibility towards our parents, families, benefactors (and fellow religious for putting up with us); a realization of their dependence upon our prayers and the merits of our good works.

Duty to vote for or against a candidate for vows not on the basis of pleasing a superior or a clique.

I think envy can curtail the work of many who could do more for Christ. I'm speaking of subjects and superiors as well.

Justice is sometimes neglected in the emphasis on charity and mercy.

Justice towards *all*.

Imposing on others, when unnecessary.

Superiors (I've been a superior) should have a conference on consideration for the sick, even for sisters sick for a few days; also, we need to hear about the importance of giving proper food to the community—the average home diet—and refraining from specials served to superiors.

11. Fortitude (20%)

In the chapter on the emotional trials of sisters we have already seen the factors that tempt religious women to lose courage:

St. Teresa of Avila wanted her religious to be strong, virile—not womanish.

Why is there always so much work?

As women—how to acquire the courage for openness in confession.

I think a great deal of honesty and frankness is missing. Too often we are inclined to live unrealistically. We need to understand and realize that our life is really simple—even easy next to the difficulties found in the outside world. We don't need sympathy—we need courage!

Fortitude—to be reminded that we have freely made a choice of life that entails the constant giving of self; that it is a beautiful life with compensations beyond compare if we make it so—to the degree that we have emptied ourselves in preparation.

Proper acceptance of change of residence, of ill-health, of old age.

We need to be big.

The constant need for self-sacrifice at every age, especially as religious grow older; the courage and humility needed to follow the bell.

The fact that if we would give something to God, let us give him our smallness and insufficiency—the one thing we have which he does not have.

St. Thérèse of Lisieux is the modern saint for the modern woman with her feminine psychological troubles. Ida F. Goerres has come up with the real Thérèse in *The Hidden Face*. The chapters in this book dealing with her life in the

Lisieux Carmel reveal all the types of suffering that women in religious life today must contend with. The virility of St. Thérèse is the concrete answer to how religious women can love God. Women need to be big.

12. *Temperance* (16%)

Humility vs. Pride	13%
Mortifications	8%
Recreation	6%

A recognition that humility is truth.

Aiming for popularity or prestige. . . . Competition.

Humility and the overcoming of pride and self-love.

* * *

Mortifications for today's religious.

Improper use of time; acquiring many unnecessary articles; accumulation of materials—the spirit of poverty.

Detachment.

How to overcome the insidious influence of materialism.

This implies stress on how we must keep pace professionally without losing or perverting our religious ideals.

* * *

Must *all* of us always be doing the *same* thing *all* the time?

The lack of imagination and means of varying the time of recreation, which causes poor mental attitudes. Some houses always use the same room (usually unsuitable) and do the same things. Religious need change of place and activity. I believe one can offer up most things, but lack of recreation affects the personality, I believe. On the other hand, after a hearty, enjoyable recreation I find that religious relish their prayer periods more.

What makes a recreation?

I think that it is necessary for sisters to be allowed to enjoy sports—like one big family: picnics, baseball, ice-skating, even swimming; of course, everything at the right time and place. It is a great help for the healthy life of a sister, not only physically, but ultimately, spiritually.

* * *

13. *The Religious Vocation* (2%)

(A large number of novices, 21%, wanted conferences on this topic):

The basic reasons why we are religious.

Give emphasis to the beauty of the religious vocation as a gift from God and the obligations that come from this gratuitous gift.

The nobility of our vocation as children of the Father, spouses of the Son, and co-workers with the Holy Spirit.

What makes a good teaching, nursing, or domestic sister—each specifically.

14. *The Vows* (46%)

Poverty	37%
Chastity	42%
Obedience	44%
Rules and Constitutions	10%

As we have seen, conferences on the vows rank third in order of popularity and would seem to be a “must” in any well-planned retreat. Each of the three vows ranks high.

Conferences on the vows always interest me the most. And I think they should come towards the end of the retreat, because, after they have been given, it seems to me that the most important part of the retreat is completed.

Every state of life has its crosses but, in comparison, ours are less difficult to bear because of our consecration through our vows.

The virtues of obedience, poverty, chastity in connection with the vows—so much more valuable than a series of isolated talks on such topics.

The vows—treated separately.

* * *

Poverty in this day and age.

The observance of poverty in modern living conditions.

Define over-familiarity with priests or externs.

Respect for authority.

The vows, particularly obedience from its positive aspect.

If the conference is permeated with the spirit of the order and with frequent reference to the rule and constitutions it will bear much fruit when applied by the individual religious to her own vocation as a member of her community.

If there are to be conferences on the vows, I should like them to be specific and practical—not just the same old summaries of generalities.

* * *

I want above all the positive approach, stressing the beauty and dignity of the religious life, how important the role of religious is in the life of the Church. Emphasis should be placed on love as the motivating factor.

(From a superior) I want to hear a good conference on purity as it applies to religious women. We often hear an abstract talk on chastity, but a practical one would be an immense help. We need realistic conferences, because girls enter when they are quite young. Even older sisters are surprised when they are still tempted—and these temptations can be mighty strong when one is discouraged or feels unappreciated. Sisters are first of all women—before they are religious—but some have difficulty understanding that they *are* women. In their ignorance, sisters have, at times, led young men and women astray. How have they done it? In two ways: by causing a loss of potential vocations, and, secondly, by acting as a source of sexual temptation.

(1) Sisters, by disloyalty to their community, by critical comments about other sisters or community rules before seculars, or by leading worldly lives, can cause girls whom God is calling to the religious life to put aside the thought of a vocation. I have heard girls remark, after observing some unbecoming conduct, "If that is what religious life is like, then it's not for me." Boys, too, have lost their vocations by associating with sisters who have indirectly convinced them that they would not be happy as priests.

(2) In regard to chastity, we must remember that women—including religious—have an instinctive knowledge of feminine wiles. If they are not truly dedicated, they will put this knowledge to use to secure popularity. Remember, too, that men are not immune if a woman (even a sister) decides to turn on her charm. Sisters, because they are women, have thus become sources of temptation to men (and even priests), even though they may not have intended anything more than being popular to begin with. If the women of her community don't appreciate her, then a sister can manage to find *someone* who will—a boy, a man, or even a girl student. You may see or hear of things

like this, but be shock-proof. Be understanding but never condone.

16. *Christ and His Body*

Christ himself	16%
The Church (his mystical body)	13%
The Sacred Heart	2%
The Cross (or Passion)	2%

The only real sadness is not to love Christ.

Something beautiful and Christlike in your retreat is much more acceptable and not so gloomy, dark, and unappealing.

The love of Christ for each one of us personally.

A Christ-centered retreat based possibly on the Gospels or Pauline epistles (never forgetting the spirituality characteristic of the particular community).

We exist only for Christ. Why not base the retreat on a Christocentric theme with much reference to Scripture?

I need to realize again the catholicity or universality of the Church so that my love for souls may more closely imitate his.

The Cross—its meaning for us as religious. The Cross as a sign of God's love.

The meaning of my life in Christ incarnate in the twentieth century; my life in the stream of Christ's divinity—sanctifying grace. The mystery of the sacrifice of the Mass, my sacrifice in Christ's sacrifice.

17. *The Liturgy and the Sacraments*

Mass	21%
Liturgy	8%
Sacraments in general	11%
Confession	22%
Holy Eucharist	20%
Baptism, its graces	1%
Confirmation, its graces	1%

Living the life of the liturgy, eliminating any subjective, saccharine treatment of the life of Christ.

The liturgy, as the indispensable source of the true Christian spirit. Our duty of actively participating in the liturgy.

I think it is necessary repeatedly to point out to sisters how much they will grow spiritually by delving ever more deeply into the liturgy of the Church, and by striving to become ever more conscious of the great privilege that is theirs in belonging to his mystical body.

New thoughts on Holy Communion and Mass.

How to make the retreat confession in such a way that its effect will bear fruit in the coming year. Ways of making the weekly confession a more powerful means of advancement.

Confession—what sort of things to confess, beyond the more serious venial sins. How to ask for direction.

18. Mary (15%)

It will be noted that a regretably small number of sisters requested conferences on Christ or his Blessed Mother (Some 24% of the novices, however, wished to hear a conference on Mary).

Our Lady's "fiat."

Talk of the Mother of God. I don't care how you do it, but please do it. Sometimes we seem to forget Mary. I learned to love her properly only after being ill and away from my community for a while. I must honestly say that devotion to Our Lady is more piety than actual realization of her essential part in the spiritual life. And this is a sad admission to have to make. Most religious, I am sure, are devoted to the Rosary and have other ways of showing love for the Mother of God. Take this as one of your biggest tasks, Father, to explain Mary's part in our lives, so that our sentimental devotions may be changed to the real thing. That's quite a challenge! Since De Montfort's works have become more widespread, I think that Mary's place has been better understood, but how essential she is to the growth of holiness is not deeply enough realized, I know. . . . In regard to the Mother of God, I think *much* has yet to be said to sisters.

PARTICULAR CHOICES

We have now come to the end of those general topics upon which the sisters made comments, but there were

also several particular problems they brought up which are hard to fit into any outline. Some 5% of the sisters, for instance, would like to hear more about the relation of *woman's psychology* to the spiritual life.

Another particular problem, disturbing some 4%, is whether or not to hide one's talents or to try to see that they are used to the fullest advantage. Here are some of their comments:

To what extent does God want us to use our talents, no matter how limited?

Development of personality with a view to perfecting ourselves in order to have more to give to others for Christ's sake.

Time is well spent when we use it to improve ourselves.

Again some of the sisters took this opportunity to request the retreat master to use an encouraging, positive approach, rather than a negative one:

I am always happy when the retreat master stresses doing better in the future. None of us can undo what's done; the best we can do is repent and learn from past mistakes.

A beautiful Christlike pattern of what to do and not to do (the moral virtues) and not a dark, gloomy, and unappealing tirade.

Another sister expressed the following desire:

We need to be reminded sometimes of what people really think of us. We forget sometimes that they have us on a pedestal, and often we do things that may smash that image. We claim to be religious when sometimes good people in the world can put us to shame. We expect others to keep the commandments and do not do so ourselves (It's more "Do as I say," not "Do as I do."). You can pick up a lot of hints after you have worked with seculars awhile.

In addition, several sisters requested discussion periods to supplement the conferences:

A general, open discussion for all types of questions and suggestions—this, I think, should be a part of every retreat.

Time for discussion *for those who would like it* (Definitely make it clear that all *are not* obliged to attend; otherwise, those who think discussions are a waste of time or for odd-balls will keep the sincere ones quiet as well).

This brings to a close our study of the topics the sisters would like to hear about. We now come to a consideration of the qualities the sisters would like to see in the retreat master himself.

VI

THE RETREAT MASTER

The sisters' evaluation of the personal characteristics they find in their retreat masters is derived from their answers to "What are your chief complaints against retreat masters?"

The answers to this frank question are, of course, bound to be negative; but the purpose of this investigation is to arrive at the truth—at those elements of a retreat that can be improved rather than at a flattering picture of what can remain as it stands.

So important is the character of the speaker to the success of what he says that Aristotle did not hesitate to say:

It is not true, as some writers on the art maintain, that the probity of the speaker contributes nothing to his persuasiveness; on the contrary, we might almost affirm that his character (*ethos*) is the most potent of all the means to persuasion.¹

The speaker's character is especially important in dealing with women, for they are often more influenced by

¹*The Rhetoric of Aristotle*, trans. Lane Cooper (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1932), p. 9.

persons than by ideas. Even religious women are frequently encouraged to seek perfection, because of the sympathetic attitude a priest manifests towards their strivings.

COMMON FAILINGS

The following, then, ordered according to the number of times they were mentioned by the sisters, are the comments concerning the retreat master's character:

1. Lack of Compassion (34%)

A seeming lack of compassion or sympathy on the part of the retreat master towards his retreatants shows itself in mild form as a mere lack of interest, or, in more virulent form, as a real dislike for people in general or sisters in particular (manifested, for instance, by sarcasm).

The attitude of "you can take it or leave it." . . .

We need someone who understands, Father, someone who can see our side of the story, who can sympathize, yet not feel sorry for us—who can scold us kindly and help us get back on the right track.

Being aloof; rather, show the true qualities of a gentleman: respectfulness and understanding.

Unavailableness for advice, counsel, confession at any time.

Lack of patience with sisters' problems.

Inconsiderateness in requests for food, and so forth.

Unwillingness to sacrifice your own time in giving conferences or in hearing confessions.

We do not like being talked down to.

Sometimes they talk down to us as if we were not in reality fairly well-read and educated.

Frightening us—encourage us instead.

Belittling us.

Unpreparedness, resulting in filling out the time by bawling out the sisters. I've heard priests say that, whenever they aren't prepared, they resort to this.

Crabbiness—rather, exemplify the gentleness of Christ.

An attitude of sarcasm or indifference or a kind of cynicism towards today's religious.

Please avoid caustic criticism.

A superior attitude, sarcasm, and ridicule may put spice into a retreat but these momentary flashes leave the night darker than ever.

Over against this rather bleak picture were laudatory remarks such as the following:

The best retreat I have had so far was one given by a priest who in his opening conference mentioned that he had noticed that some of the sisters looked thin and tired. He wanted them to get a good rest now that they had this chance. We smiled at that, as you can imagine, but appreciated it all the same. Do you see what I mean? He was practical in his own way in practicing charity.

The best retreat I have had so far was given by a priest who took such a sincere interest in his work that we sisters got the impression that here was a priest who understood our needs and really wanted to help us in whatever way he could.

One aspect of lack of compassion that was singled out for special mention (by 5% of the sisters) was the tendency of some retreat masters to criticize superiors or subjects too severely:

Belittling superiors (I'm not a superior).

Assuming that all superiors are ogres.

I'm not a superior but we don't like belittling superiors; inferiors either, for that matter.

Don't show partisanship by harping on either superiors or subjects.

Do not charge either superiors or subjects for all the shortcomings. Both have failings; both need encouragement.

One of the more common complaints concerned a lack of compassion manifested in the confessional:

Some are in such a hurry to finish confessions that one may not feel free to ask advice. The best retreat master I've had was one who made his penitents feel right at home by questions on their duties, and so forth. You then feel as if the priest is sincerely interested in you and your quest for perfection.

One area where most religious women are neglected, I believe, is the sacrament of penance. Many priests, not all, are in a hurry, or perhaps they don't even come at all. Then, with some, if you confess faults, you are apt to receive a lengthy instruction on the difference between sins and imperfection (If you don't root out imperfections you will never become perfect).

We're all women and, let's face it, we need spiritual direction—which we don't get.

A certain fear of approaching the confessional of the retreat master, especially when the penitent recalls something serious that happened during the year which must be manifested if she is to receive help.

Weekly confession is a matter of dumping your spiritual laundry off at the new two-minute, speed-jet confessor (this holds true for retreat confessions, as well). The extraordinary almost cuts your nose off as you race (necessarily) through the act of contrition. One sister said, "Well, I just determined that I'd kneel there and say it all the way through, and, by golly, by the time I finished, Father had the door open again for a new penitent." On the other hand, I've lived with some sisters where their weekly confessors keep them at least five minutes (Somewhere, there must be a happy medium).

Clearing up personal problems in the confessional is very peace-bestowing. I've noticed that retreat masters who are devoted to confession effect a satisfying retreat.

And lastly, although the sisters ask for sympathetic treatment, they recognize the danger of an overly "soft" approach:

Don't talk down to us, but don't stress how good we are and thus not touch on our shortcomings either.

A "soft" approach, both in conferences and in the confessional, implying that sisters are already holy when a little "fire and brimstone" might arouse them to their true spiritual capacity. Also, failure to give an opening in confession for the asking of advice or explaining of some difficulty; and the expression, "Keep up the good work, sister," when the penitent is all too aware that it's not good at all.

All these comments, of course, concern the virtue of mercy, which is charity in action. One third of the sisters

*True
in many
places!
He have
been
pleased!*

had some criticism to make about retreat masters on this score—nearly twice as many criticisms as for any other character failing.

2. *Levity* (20%)

But Some Humor Is Desired (7%)*

Connected with the overly soft approach mentioned above is the excessive attempt on the part of the retreat master to please his retreatants by making jokes. The sisters' comments clearly show that they do not expect him to be an entertainer, and that too many jokes give the impression that he is not himself serious about the spiritual life.

The sisters were, however, careful to distinguish between jokes and humor. Most sisters desired *some* humor, but few wanted jokes in their retreats. By humor they mean the ability to see incongruous elements that flow naturally from a given situation or subject. By jokes they mean stories and remarks made solely for the purpose of provoking laughter without relevance to the topic and to the dignity befitting a sermon in chapel.

Joke or humor-filled conferences can defeat the primary objective.

Hilarious laughter and jokes have no place in a retreat.

An occasional joke is fine, if necessary, but the retreat is our spiritual food for the rest of the year.

Too many jokers.

Too many jokes (we do not make a retreat to be entertained).

A few waste time on irrelevant jokes or stories.

One thing most sisters don't go for is the telling of jokes. I must say that I have been fortunate in not having a retreat master who did either this or read his conferences.

I like a more or less serious retreat master—not one who tells lots of jokes.

*Characteristically, twice as many novices (18%) as professed sisters were anxious to find some humor in their conferences.

Some think they must entertain with "funny" stories, particularly belittling superiors.

Those who make each session hilarious for the novices who giggle at anything.

Attempts to bring in humor through jokes and stories is distracting and draws attention from the topic he is discussing.

. . . Being the inveterate joker or story-teller (not bad once in a while, but for three conferences a day for eight days?). . . .

Some humor, however, is desired; this can be seen from the following comments:

Humor is most refreshing when efforts are not so obvious to create it.

Don't tell funny stories *continually*—a little humor is greatly desired however.

He should have some humor or stories, as we need a break; also we sometimes remember the point to a story better than anything else.

Lack of a sense of humor (not that funny stories have to be told continually) . . .

Not a complete lack of humor, please.

Proper amount of humor—none is worse than too much.

I would say one of the chief faults of retreat masters is not bringing any humor into the conferences.

A joke or story here and there relieves tension, but sisters are not looking for entertainment in a retreat.

3. *Personal Holiness is Desired in Retreat Masters (12%)*

The third comment of sisters about some retreat masters is the same as that voiced by St. Augustine: "Why do you not practice what you are preaching to me?"² Holiness is, of course, a general term that embraces any number of possible qualities (including the two already mentioned: compassion and seriousness of purpose), but the following are the sisters' comments in their own words:

²*On Christian Instruction* (New York: Fathers of the Church Inc., 1945), p. 230.

It seems to me that the first requisite for a retreat master is holiness of life.

It is extremely difficult for me to accept what a man tells me I should be doing when I am almost positive that he himself is not living the kind of life he is telling me that I should be living. I know I shouldn't feel this way, but I just can't help wondering how a man with a knowledge of theology can ask me to do what he can't do—when I don't even have that knowledge.

Men who impose a rigorous asceticism on women will make little impression on them if they themselves do not ring true.

In any person dedicated to God a lack of reverence in regard to spiritual things is very sad.

Evidencing a lack of mortification in your own life when asking us to practice it.

I believe the great inspiration of a retreat master is his reverence in offering the Sacrifice of the Mass—also, his spirit of prayer during the retreat.

A priest who daily turns to our Lord in meditation and in the Holy Sacrifice, who is himself striving to be worthy of his vocation, is the best conference we can have. It is the practical example of knowing that others are finding that "God alone suffices" that has often helped me in retreats.

From their comments it is clear, then, that the example of holiness the sisters hope to find in their retreat master consists in a spirit of prayer—especially as shown in the way he says Mass—and in a spirit of mortification (which becomes particularly important if his conferences are demanding in this regard).

4. Lack of Understanding of his Audience (10%)

The sisters comment on several kinds of failure in the preacher's audience analysis.

The first concerns an inability to gauge the intellectual level of the sisters; some priests talk over the sisters' heads:

Avoid being the polished rhetorician and philosopher who moves from cause to effect without realizing the intellectual caliber of the retreatants as a whole, particularly if the group includes the very young or the very old.

Be down to earth—that's where most of us are.

While learned eloquence is a treat for most sisters, they look rather for sincerity and personal conviction.

Eruditeness—the speaker who seems to wish to display his learning, who uses terminology and language that goes over the heads of those who do not enjoy a like education.

Others insult the sisters' intelligence:

Now, we don't pretend to be brilliantly educated or anything like that or to have the theological preparation of an ordained priest, but we do know the things that any decently trained postulant mistress will tell her girls in the first three months of their religious life, and some of us have had four years of college by the time we are out on mission. Yet every year we sit there and listen to dressed-up catechism lessons the likes of which we teach our own pupils or which we have heard repeated ten times over. And most of us are sharp enough to get it the first time. I don't mind hearing something repeated, but the speaker could at least indicate that he suspects I heard it before. But to insult our intelligence the way it has been insulted these past years is to try our humility to its very lowest boiling point. This is the fifth straight summer retreat I have made in which I had all I could do to keep from picking up my chair and throwing it.

I thought maybe I was the only one that felt that way, but in talking around the morning we came off retreat I got spirited yeahs to my reaction. And it is this: I would prefer to have someone yell at me bloody murder the whole time for the things in which he thinks sisters fail in their apostolate, so as to go back renewed and chastened, than to have someone roll out pretty phrases and trite truths that need present-day application. We want to be jolted—not to be told how wonderful we are (though I know that is necessary, too, in very small doses). It is like going to confession and having the confessor tell you what a nice confession it was.

Taking these comments in conjunction with what we have seen regarding the sisters' dislike of being "talked down to," we realize the necessity of the retreat master's correctly assessing their intellectual needs—neither aiming over their heads, nor insulting them by treating them as

if they "were not in reality fairly well-read and educated." A failure to understand the retreatants' intellectual abilities may be accompanied by a failure to understand their practical needs as well. Witness the following comments:

Understand the community's apostolate; for example, certain founders would surely take an active interest in alcoholics, interracial affairs, or the like, while others would have nothing to do with these problems.

Why is it that a retreat master will come to a hospital to give a retreat and never mention hospital work or hospital problems during the whole retreat? The long hours on duty, seven days a week, every day of every week of the year, is fatiguing; we need help when retreat comes around.

When speaking to a mixed group avoid too much on one work or the other, especially if you are not too well acquainted with the work, its dangers and problems; you may be misunderstood by the other groups.

We are not all teachers; hence, always referring to the difficulties and problems of teachers goes against the grain.

Some are too naive: sisters wouldn't do this or that. . . .

Concrete topics far surpass mere stories and flimsy examples of "sister so-and-so"; our life is real.

On the other hand, several sisters mention a lack of judgment on the part of some retreat masters who *are* trying to be eminently practical:

The tendency to cite specific personality defects and weaknesses can be overemphasized; as a result, before the conferences are over, some poor soul is pinned.

Do not talk about any particular order with which you happen to be familiar unless you make all your comments very general; the sisters to whom you are speaking will fear that you will use them as examples in the future.

The most common complaint about lack of understanding is that some retreat masters fail to understand psychology in general and women's psychology in particular (7% of the sisters mentioned this weakness):

In order to give a good retreat, Father, it is most necessary that you thoroughly understand women in gen-

eral. I know that you have probably studied psychology, but here are a few things to be especially aware of: Women were born to love and if this is not turned to God or to others for the love of God, then it will turn back upon self, and you will find cases of self-pity, overeating, discouragement, and so forth. Women are jealous and suspicious by nature; they notice little things and details and hence are critical of others and can read a lot into little things that were not meant at all; women need to be needed; they are complex, and community life is much more difficult for them than for men; their life centers around their monthly period—for some this causes no difficulty, but for others it is a real cross. Wrong decisions can easily be made when they are not feeling good, and molehills are made into mountains.

Remember too, Father, that several of the women to whom you will be talking are perfectionists, and people of this type suffer a great deal from nerves, and so forth. They must learn to make decisions and stick to them, because they so often lose time wondering which of two things is more pleasing to God when both are equally good, with the result that they become all wrought up. They must also take others at face value and not expect them to be perfectionists also, and must realize that they themselves cannot always work at top level.

5. *Evidence of Egotism (5%)*

Last, a few sisters mention having been annoyed by signs of apparent conceit on the part of the retreat master:

Obvious conceit and self-opinion should be avoided. . . .
Affectation. . . .

Avoid talking about yourself, giving such complete details that one could write your biography.

I learned more about my former home town during one retreat than I ever knew after living there for twenty-one years. I also learned the retreat master's life, from his birth on.

CONCLUSION

We can sum up the sisters' comments in regard to the personal characteristics of their retreat masters by saying

that they are disappointed when they do not find that he manifests the following traits:

- 1) charity, in being sympathetic to their problems—but not soft;
- 2) seriousness of purpose, tempered by the ability to see humor;
- 3) a spirit of prayer, coupled with mortification;
- 4) a prudent understanding of his audience's needs and psychology;
- 5) humility.

VII

COMMENTS ON DELIVERY

The sisters' remarks on delivery were also garnered from their replies to "What are your chief complaints against retreat masters?" Considering that the question was not structured to guide the answers and that the sisters put down whatever spontaneously came to their minds, it is significant to find a loud chorus raised on two points: "Don't read at us" and "Be vital!"

COMMON FAILINGS

1. Reading Conferences (51%)

It is surprising to find that reading retreat conferences is so prevalent a practice that more than half the sisters voiced complaints. Father Dubay, in his report, also found that "reading conferences" was the defect most frequently mentioned by sisters (in a list that also included comments on the preacher's character*). A good reader can do justice to a well-prepared retreat, but most retreat masters apparently are not skilled enough to read their talks and still hold the attention of their listeners.

**Op. cit.*, p. 23.

The following are a few among the many comments made:

Don't read talks, please!

Reading "at" us.

Reading; retreats should be preached. . . .

Conferences read in a monotonous fashion. . . .

Extensive reading of prepared notes that are not practical or are bookish.

Reading at us instead of talking to us—conferences read from beginning to end. . . .

Some make their sermons a rehashing of parish missions or theology lectures—and usually straight from notes.

2. *Dull Delivery, Lack of Vitality (19%)*

Avoid being dull!

Some lack dynamism in personality and delivery.

Heaviness . . . monotonous delivery.

Be direct, vital, and sincere, Father.

Many retreat masters drone on and on—producing sleep.

Putting us to sleep; rather, stir us up.

Dullness because of a lack of interest—please do not mistake me; the faults mentioned do not apply to the majority of retreat masters. Most of them are eager to give all the help possible.

Being seated all the time is bad.

Conferences can be too dry—too much like summer school.

I find it easy to like retreats, but a lively manner helps to combat drowsiness.

3. *All Other Defects of Delivery (10%)*

Among the miscellany of other delivery defects mentioned, the most common was "shouting." The following are typical comments on the various vices of delivery:

Some shout too much.

Don't yell at us, please.

Giving a mission instead of a retreat.

Sisters like a relaxing manner, not a driving or discouraging one, but one with a variety of approaches.

Not enough volume for those in back.

Dramatics. . . . Drama and oratory—leave that to the actors.

Lack of naturalness; be yourself—not strained.

Avoid: no eye contact, mumbling, shouting, and using certain pet words and phrases too frequently.

Tedious repetition of “and so” and other such phrases.

Repeated phrases and habits of expression, e.g., “You are doing a grand job,” every conference for ten days.

Don’t harp on the same topic, for example: “And now we return to the porch at Bethany”; it gets to be a joke and the sisters start laughing—or, at least, smiling.

Constant yanking of sleeves, belt, or cincture. . . .

One sister simply stated with philosophic calm, “Some people just aren’t good speakers.”

4. *Conferences Are Too Long (34%)*

Although the optimum length for conferences doesn’t exactly fit under “delivery,” this spot seems the best place to treat it. Averaging all the sisters’ comments together we come to the conclusion that they prefer their conferences to run between 25 and 35 minutes in length.

Among the complaints about long-winded talks were the following:

My chief complaint against retreat masters is that they so often go considerably overtime in their talks.

Too long; especially when they are condemning us, or when the matter is completely negative, or when it’s on mortal sin, death, or hell.

Avoid lengthy conferences (over 30 minutes).

Extremely long conferences (extending to an hour or more!); a half hour or 35 minutes is enough.

Aim at between 35 and 45 minutes. If it’s less than that, we think it isn’t worthwhile assembling; any longer than that, and we start wondering when it will end.

I’d say, no conferences over 30 minutes; however, that may be too rigid; sometimes, 20 minutes. I have sat through many a 40 minute conference that seemed a minute.

There was a minority, however, who complained that conferences are too short (3%):

Talking for only 15 minutes.

Too short sometimes (that is, less than 20 minutes) when they're *good!*

We should note, however, that sisters seem to prefer longer conferences than do priests or male religious. Woman has a greater staying power during long instructions and sermons and during the sacrament of penance, while the patience of man is very soon exhausted. Not only are sisters hungry for the religious truth for which they have so little time during the year, but physically and psychologically they are more receptive to longer conferences than are men.

We hazard the guess, then, that the optimum length of a retreat conference for men is between 20 and 25 minutes, while the ideal for women would be from 25 to 35 minutes.

CONCLUSION

We can summarize the sisters' comments on delivery with four major requests:

- 1) "Do not read your conferences to us."
- 2) "Be vital and show enthusiasm in your delivery."
- 3) "Speak loudly enough to be heard, but don't shout."
- 4) "Talk for about 30 minutes."

SUMMARY

Summing up in capsule form the most important suggestions made by the sisters, we present the following conclusions—as one of the sisters might herself give them:

1. Father, you have no idea how much we look forward to your retreat. During the year many of us get practically nothing by way of spiritual direction. We are spiritually starved, so you will find us a most receptive audience.

And we expect so much from you!

2. Encourage us. Please don't browbeat us. We *are* trying, but we get tired and discouraged. Falling into discouragement and self-pity is one of our big temptations, Father. So please, give us hope.

3. Consequently, center your talks on the beauty of the spiritual life. Be positive, rather than withering our spirits with a sin-centered approach.

4. Tell us how—exactly how—to practice what you preach. Generalities will never satisfy us.

5. As a general topic we want to hear about the life of perfection. Give us the benefit of what you learned in ascetic and mystical theology. Don't sell us short; we want sanctity.

6. We want to hear about charity most of all. Not only is it our favorite topic, but it is the one we sin against most often. First of all, *convince* us that God really loves

us. If we really believed that we could do anything for Him.

Then tell us how we can do better in loving our neighbor—especially our fellow sisters. How do we love those who have different temperaments or who treat us harshly?

7. We also desperately want to hear about prayer. We are convinced of the necessity of prayer, but show us how to pray. Above all, Father, how can we combine a life of frantic activity with the contemplation we are supposed to practice?

8. We also want to hear more on the vows. Obedience, when we don't like or agree with the superior, is always a problem. And then too, we would like a practical—but tactful—conference on chastity (We have heard so many in the abstract order).

9. We tend to get a narrow outlook on life that is colored by our emotions. Give us perspective. Teach us that reason—not emotion—is what counts.

10. Most of us have a terrific work load. Give us the right spiritual outlook on how to bear it.

11. Speak for about 25 minutes. If what you have to say is especially valuable, though, we will gladly listen for 35 or 40 minutes.

12. Show that you understand our problems. We don't want a soft approach, but if you seem unduly harsh, we may bottle up our private problems for another year for fear of approaching you.

13. Be especially kind in confession. During the year many of us are assigned confessors who have little time to give us. Some of us desperately need advice, so please don't cut us off. We appreciate being asked, after our recital of sins, "Is there anything else you would like to ask?" Some of us are timid and need the spur of such a question.

14. Try to find out about the goals and practices of our congregation. It will help in confession—and in making the conference practical.

15. You don't have to amuse us. We like touches of humor, but we are serious about making our retreat.

16. Please don't read at us.

17. Show enthusiasm and interest in what you are saying.

18. Speak loudly enough so that the older sisters can hear (but don't go too far and shout).

Epilogue

We wish to thank all the sisters who answered the questionnaire—especially those who went further and wrote letters of encouragement. Since the sisters were asked to voice their complaints, this report may give a somewhat one-sided view of their attitudes. In fairness, then, we end with the following composite letter, made up of excerpts from eleven letters, in which the sisters express their gratitude and appreciation:

Dear Father:

Sorry you asked for this, but are we grateful! For years I've been saying to myself, "I'd love to tell a retreat master just what I think if I'd get a chance." I never dreamed I'd get that chance, but I really took advantage of my opportunity. Thank you! Whether any of this will be of value to you or not, I wish to thank you for the opportunity of airing the difficulties some of us have.

We need help.

Just keep in mind, Father, that most of us feel that we are just beginning to lift our feeble feet to the first rung of the ladder of perfection and that we are eager for any and all the help that we can get. May you never lose this eagerness to help; that is our sincere prayer for you. I hope that you can find some remedies for our

problems and bring them out in the retreat conferences—we are, and will be, most grateful.

Yours is a difficult task: you've the beginners, the advanced, the retarded, the bored, the saints. However, every sister needs recognition, response, new experiences, and security.

You are prepared to give the sisters what their souls most long for—so tackle the task with God's grace and your courage in your hands. I think retreat masters will have a big reward waiting for them in heaven, for retreats must be rather difficult work.

May the Holy Spirit bless you and your work!

God love you,

The Sisters

**Dominican Sisters
St. Francis de Sales Convent
Riverside, California**

*“In order to give a good retreat to sisters,
it is most necessary that you thoroughly
understand women. . . .”*

*“Let love and not fear be emphasized; so
often we come out of a retreat all mixed
up.”*

*“Be down to earth — that’s where most of
us are.”*

*“We are so afraid of getting hurt, of losing
something, that we can’t let ourselves
go into the arms of God, trusting him.”*

“Teach us to love.”