On the Centenary of the Society (1639)

Mutio Vitelleschi, born to a noble family in Rome in 1563, entered the Society of the Jesus only after securing permission from Pope Gregory XIII. The Jesuits elected Vitelleschi their sixth superior general in 1615. His generalate saw worldwide expansion in missions and in membership to some 15,000 men but also an increase in the antagonism against the Society, including several martyrdoms and the expulsion of Nicolás Caussin, Louis XIII’s confessor, from France. Vitelleschi, therefore, used the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Society of Jesus as an opportunity to release this document, an extended encouragement to his confreres and acknowledgement of the hindrances to its future successes.

The year on which we are now entering should be one of gladness for us and rich with consolation, for it marks the close of a hundred years since the birth and foundation of our Order. It would be a great happiness for me to meet you all at this time in person, and by my presence wish you joy; but since this may not be, I greet you all in spirit and holy love, and, as no better way is left me to reach you, I send you a letter, one of those letters which Saint Ignatius the Martyr was fond of calling “kindly ports,” because they still keep up sweet intercourse and interchange of thought with those who are far away. I come then in spirit to you all, and tenderly embrace each one of you, dear Fathers and Brothers, whom, after the Apostle, I will call my own bowels in the bowels of Jesus Christ. With every mark of love I offer my congratulations to the whole Society, over which our common Lord long since willed to set me as his servant, though most unworthy of so high a charge. The Divine Goodness has deigned to fill my heart with a holy gladness in this our hour of joy, and I invite you all to share with me these emotions, while we recall together the sweet remembrance of the great blessings which our loving Lord and Father has bestowed on us during all these years with bounteous and unfailing hand. For all these favors we should be deeply grateful; and, surely, it would be but a poor return to make, were we to stop with mere words and protestations of gratitude. We must do more. We must show renewed ardor and earnest endeavor in the service of so good a Master, and must strive for the future, as far as our weakness allows, to merit in every way his kind protection.

After consultation with the Fathers Assistants, I have judged it well to accede to the wish of the Provinces in their earnest petition that this year might not be allowed to pass without some solemn and public recognition; and I have made known my decision in a letter which I wrote recently to the Houses of the Society. In granting this petition I have been influenced by the hope that in this way we might best acquire those graces of which we stand in need, but still more by the thought that thus we should incur fresh obligations, and be forced, as it were, to recognize that before God and man we are now bound by new pledges and that our lives should show perfection and sanctity corresponding to the graces for which with so much solemnity we give thanks to God. Then, too, external pomp and ceremony are wont to leave a deep impression on the soul and help us to reflect, and we go forth quickened in spirit and with the strong purpose to show in our lives those virtues of which this fleeting and evanescent splendor is but the faintest image.
This was the purpose God had in view when He established a jubilee year to be kept by the Jews at certain fixed periods, for He knew it would tend to the welfare and preservation of His people. He had led that people out of Egypt and had brought them to the promised land, and it was His wish that they should never lose possession of the portion that had been given them. He ordained that these possessions should remain fixed to the family, and that each family should transmit to its last descendants its ancient heritage and honor. For this reason He forbade them by law to alienate their goods. If, however, anyone through need or change of fortune, had lost any part of his possessions, a year was fixed in recurring periods, in which all that was sold should revert to the ancient possessor, who was thenceforth to be the owner of these goods as though he had never sold them.

It seems to me, dear Fathers and Brothers, that I hear our Lord calling on St. Ignatius at this time in the very words which He spoke of old to Moses: “Thou shalt sound the trumpet in the seventh month…in all your land. And thou shalt sanctify the fiftieth year, and shall proclaim remission to all the inhabitants of the land: for it is the year of jubilee. Surely, it has happened not without the kind disposition of divine Providence and the guidance of St. Ignatius, that the solemn proclamation of this year of grace has come precisely in the seventh month. But that this year may be for us one of jubilee, a glad, holy year, learn from our Lord’s words what must be done: “Every man shall return to his possession, and everyone shall go back to his former family; because it is the jubilee.” If through any misfortune or fault of Ours aught of the world’s dust has clung to us during these hundred years; if any portion of this land of saints, which belongs wholly to Jesus Christ and is not ours to barter, has passed from us into the hands of strangers; or if, perchance, the bustle of the world or continual intercourse with men has made us, I will not say, slaves, for by the mercy of God I cannot say it, or even fear it; but if this commerce has in the least weakened our hearts or bound our affections to the world, then, “every man shall return to his possession, and everyone shall go back to his former family: because it is the jubilee.” Let us reclaim what is ours. Let us re_gain that heritage left us by our first Fathers; that poverty which found its joy and wealth in being stript of all things; that purity which it is enough to call angelic; that obedience ever prompt and docile, ever ready to act at the mere sign of the Superior’s will. Finally, let us bring back those older virtues and the sanctity of our first ten Fathers that early blessed family who though few in numbers were mighty as a whole people, and by their holy zeal did the work of a century in a few short years.

I know that by the kind favor of heaven, our Society may be said to be what Isaias calls, an infant of a hundred years. But in this other and holier sense, that the Society has kept herself all these hundred years, like a tender child, innocent and free from stain; that she is more solicitous now than ever to cherish that holy innocence, and still finds her delight in that early milk of piety and virtue, which she drank in at the chaste breast of that Mother of Virgins, who gave birth to the Society and fostered our Order in its youth. If, however, by any untoward event or approach of age, the Society should seem to languish or give token of decay in any part of her body, of which we are the members, I earnestly entreat that they who feel this touch of time, will leave nothing undone that the Society may still deserve to be called an infant of a hundred years, in the sense which St. Jerome attaches to that word. This holy Doctor applies this title to Christ, who in the person of Isaac, the figure of Christ, was begotten of Abraham when he was a hundred years old. I fondly trust that, at the end of this century
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which we are now bringing to a close, it may be our consolation to hear from the lips of our holy Father St. Ignatius those sweet words: “My little children of whom I am in labor again, until Christ be formed in you.” May we, “as new-born babes,” be regenerated unto a new life in Christ, quickened in spirit, that thus Christ may live anew in us and fashion us wholly unto Himself, by the imitation of his life, that is, by the careful and perfect observance of our rules. Thus renewed in spirit, with fresh growth in strength and courage, glowing with life and eager to run in the way, we shall enter on a second century of sanctity, never resting till we arrive unto the state of “a perfect man, unto the measure of the age of the fullness of Christ.”

Our Society has always been conspicuous for this vigor and manly strength—traits that must ever go with the simple candor of the child. While our Order was yet new-born, and still a sucking child, it played on the hole of the asp;” and later, not content with fostering that first excellence, it grew with years in strength and every noble virtue.

The words of Caleb to his leader should stir us to a deep appreciation of the gratitude we owe to the goodness of God. For the Society can say to Jesus Christ, her Leader, as truly as Caleb boasted to Josue of old: “This day I am a hundred years old, as strong as I was at that time when I was sent to view the land; the strength of that time continueth in me until this day, as well to fight as to march.” Well may we say that the Society has felt the kind hand of God’s favor and mercy. She sprang into being under the protection of heaven, and through that same protection she has been preserved until this hour in that early bloom and vigor in which she gloried, when she was first sent into the world to examine the land, and see how she might bring it subject to God and His holy law. Even in our day, we see amid our ranks, to our great glory and the good of souls, countless valiant comrades, whose burning zeal and heroic strength bear testimony that the Society is still mighty, and that we have not fallen from the proud position of our ancestors, either in open battle against the hidden foe or the declared enemies of God, or in the line of march along the royal road of virtue and religious perfection. How, forsooth, could old age bring decay to her, or wrinkle mark her brow; for even from the hour of her birth she was “nurtured in the bosom of the Father,” to use the expression which Clement of Alexandria applies to Christ, finding there sweet nourishment and the unfailing source of every virtue, drawing thence that perfect life which men admire in her, and the rule of all her conduct. Surely, there is in this sweet cause of joy an incentive to new efforts, if we at all love the Society as a mother, in whom and by whom we have been brought forth unto a new life and fashioned in Christ Jesus.

Oh, what a disgrace it would be, if at a time when the Society is in her flower and strength, there should be found any amongst us so weak and void of spirit, as to be unable out of sheer exhaustion, I will not say, to undertake great works, but even to stand unmoved! What a strange thing it would be to see children old and wasted, while their mother was young and active! It would be a monstrosity and the scorn of all the world! Intelligent men would say that children of this kind belie their name when they claim to be the offspring of such a mother; they would count them as “strangers” rather, as the royal Prophet says so well: “The children that are strangers have lied to me, strange children have faded away, and have halted from their paths.” And evil-minded men and those who are ill disposed towards our Society will take occasion from the weakness and decrepitude of the children to accuse the
mother of craft, and show that she is really sterile, though in her cunning she hides her exhausted age
and makes pretense to youth and hearty vigor. Should there be any amongst us who forget their
vocation, and God grant there may never be, see what discredit they would bring on the Society, by
wandering from the royal road of our holy rules and, under the very eyes of men, whose gaze we can
never shun, living after the spirit and the manner of the world. It matters not that these unworthy
children live in the company of brethren, who walk as true Religious in the spirit of God; for though
the brightness of the virtues of others shines round about them, the stain of their lives still remains.
This only proves the truth of what St. Jerome once said about a fervent community of virgins: “It is
enough that a few do not live as they should, to bring dishonor on the holy life of others, and stain the
honor of an angelic home.” The ways of bad religious cast opprobrium on the lives of their worthy
brethren, or at least tarnish by their disorders the fair name that others have won by their virtues. It is
as the Apostle says, “a little leaven corrupteth the whole mass”. We know it takes but a few gray hairs
to dim the lustre of locks that were once black and glossy. And following the example of St. Gregory
and other Fathers, we may liken the Society to the resplendent locks that grace the head of our leader
Jesus Christ, of Whom the Holy Ghost, in his wisdom, has said: “His locks are black as a raven;”
desiring by this color to indicate the perfection of manhood, and the presence of youthful vigor and
heroic strength. Lastly, we may apply to ourselves what Salvian said so well in speaking on another
subject: “The Church,” he says (and we may say the same of the Society), “may be compared to the eye.
If but a little dust enters the eye, it blinds the sight, and light is lost in darkness; so, too, in the Church,
if even a few lead ungodly lives, it is quite enough to mar the glory and splendor of the whole body.”

I confess, dear Fathers and Brothers, this thought discomforts me and gives me pain, as I have no doubt
it does all those who have any love for so good and worthy a mother. It is sad to think that the whole
Society must be held accountable for the doings of its individual members; and I grieve the more over
this, because, as I have said elsewhere, it has been our lot all along to be judged in this way. Is it a
blessing for us, or a curse, that men should judge us thus? I shall not take it upon myself to decide; but
this much is certain, it must prove a serious evil for us, unless it brings with it, also, this good result
and happy issue, that it force us to be more on our guard, and spur us on to better things.

Such is the opinion men have formed of us, that on account of that unity of purpose which they see, or
fancy they see, in us, they impute to all the defects of a few, and condemn the whole body for the faults
of individual members. What can be more deplorable? And yet what should make us more solicitous,
or more untiring in our endeavors to lead holy lives, free from all reproach? Can it be true that I alone
am to blame for such sad words as these: The Society of Jesus has lost that angelic modesty which was
her special charm among all the religious bodies; the Jesuits no longer have that same zeal for souls;
they have lost those traits for which their works once found favor with all: that humility, gravity, and
saintliness; in fine, the Society has fallen from its olden state, and is no longer what it once was? Yes, all
this may easily happen. Do we not know that our enemies are only too eager to take up these
complaints and spread them against us? “In other communities,” says St. Gregory Nazianzen, “all are
not judged at once to be black, because there are some found of that color; nor are all deemed ignoble,
or depraved, or slothful, or intemperate, or lustful, because there are many such. Each one is judged by
himself and by his own deeds; and the measure of praise or blame which falls to each is not attributed
to all alike. Here, on the contrary, and one would think he was speaking of the Society, the sins of one are straightway imputed to all; and on account of the faults of many, or even of a few, the whole order is brought into disgrace and opprobrium. But what is worse still, the harm does not stop here, but reaches farther, and discredit is brought on our holy and venerated religion. Among those who pass criticism on us, there are a few who will be somewhat lenient and moderate, but many will push their bitterness and hatred to the extreme. Some will reproach us for our defects, yet in doing so will free our holy faith from all blame; but others will cast the blame on the law itself as being the teacher of evil."

I have said that it is the peculiar misfortune of the Society, that the sayings and doings of the individual are ascribed to the body; for it is clearly a sad thing, and very strange, that the reputation of so many good men should be made to depend on the infidelity of a few who do not live up to their rule. We must not be distressed if at times some are sent from our midst, for, as St. Augustine remarks, it is not to be wondered at, when we consider that we are very numerous, and that after all, the Order to which we belong, is made up of men, not angels. We ought rather to take great consolation in the thought of the many who are an ornament to the Society. It is not right to condemn the presses that fill the storehouse of the Lord with purest oil, for the few impurities that may be refined away.

I added, too, that that which is our misfortune, is also our gain; for it serves as a holy stimulus to spur us on, and incite us to live and act as though each of us were sustaining alone the reputation of our brethren, the honor and fair name of our mother the Society, and the glory of our king and leader, Jesus Christ.

This consideration inspires me with holy hope and with an ardent desire to see you put to profit an occasion such as this, the approach of a new century. We ought all of us to enter into ourselves and reflect seriously at this time. In the first place, we ought to examine closely all our actions, weighing them well; correcting what is wrong, making the rule our guide in everything, shaping every act by the grand models that have been left us, always keeping our high purpose in view, and ever looking to it that the splendid reputation of the Society suffer no harm at our hands. Whatever be our work in the future, let us excite ourselves to noble effort by the thought, that it is not so much we who act, as the Society through us, repeating often and fixing in our minds that saying of St. Augustine to Aprignus: “When you act, it is the Society that acts; it is for her you act, as her child.” The remembrance of this should make us fear the criticisms of men, but much more the judgment of God, Who often chastises a whole people for the sin of one. You know what happened when Achan transgressed the command, which the Lord had given to the Jewish soldiers through their leader Josue, after their splendid victory, that no man should lay hand on the spoils of the enemy. Achan alone sinned, yet all were held as guilty: “Israel hath sinned and transgressed the covenant.” Thereupon, the Lord was angry against the children of Israel, and visited the crime of one on the whole people; his wrath was kindled against them and there was dreadful slaughter; “and the heart of the people was struck with fear and melted like water; but Josue rent his garments, and fell flat on the ground before the ark of the Lord until the evening.” As Salvian remarks very justly on this passage: “the crime of one man became the scourge of all.” Fierce tempests sometimes burst upon the Society from unseen clouds and causes quite unknown. Fear comes upon us, and in our distress, we bow down our heads and fall to earth upon our knees,
while in spirit we lie prostrate in humble supplication before the ark of the New Testament, Christ Jesus, Who is in heaven. And who can say but that in such an hour the sin of one has become the scourge of all? We may well believe it so, even though our faults are not great ones nor our sins foul; for often a slight fault is enough, especially if it be joined with great ingratitude, to arouse the justice of God and kindle his wrath against all. Thus David alone incurred guilt, in causing the people to be numbered. In the ways of men this would be deemed a trifling fault; but before God, the whole people had to expiate that sin. I would fain think that it is not so with us. I like to believe that these storms which fall on the Society are not stirred up by any fault of ours, but that they come through the singular love of a most tender Father, rebuking the negligence of his sons in judgment, not in wrath. But charity is full of anxious fear, and pictures to itself the evils that might happen, though they never come to pass; and this holy fear should be ever present to those who have the interests of the Society at heart. It should be as a goad to prick them on to stricter observance of rule, and keep them always watchful, lest at any time they fall into a fault, for which the Society, that best and dearest of mothers, might be forced to atone and suffer cruel pain.

There is another matter on which we should examine ourselves with no little care. Have we allowed the fire of love to grow dim in any way? Does the spirit with which we once burned, still glow within us, in brightness not unlike that with which the Society shone in the beginning? Let us look to it; and if we chance to discover that this fire languishes in us, let us hasten to revive it, and make it glow with its former brightness. We must needs confess that the spirit can grow dull only too easily; for who is there that does not feel himself weighed down from time to time with heaviness of heart, while wandering here in this body of death. “The corruptible body is a load upon the soul,” and St. Augustine says: “The soul has its abode in a corruptible body and what manner of life does it lead there? Why, it is sorely afflicted and groans under heavy burdens. We find it hard to think of God, as it behooves us to do! How many difficulties, arising from the needs of our human lot, stand in the way and keep us back! How many lowly desires turn the soul from sublime thoughts! On all sides it is encompassed by allurements and suggestions of every kind.” Is there not in this much to weaken the soul and lead it insensibly into a state of languor? Too often, indeed, we have experienced it; and many a time we have found ourselves without strength or courage, and felt the, need of that counsel of David: “Thy youth shall be renewed like the eagle’s.” St. Augustine tells us that when this king of birds begins to grow old, a hard skin forms on the top of its beak, which so firmly joins the upper part to the lower, that it becomes impossible for the bird to open its bill or take any food; then the torpor of age comes on, and the bird languishes from sheer hunger. But, the saint adds, nature has taught the eagle how to remedy its lot, for the bird in this distress rubs its beak against a rock, till the callous growth that threatened death is worn away and the bill is once more free; “then it hastens to eat, and strength returns, and life and all the olden wealth of plumage; once again, as before, it soars aloft, and wings its proud course through the heights of heaven. The eagle has been renewed from age to youth again.” I do not pretend to say that all this is true; I merely accept it on the testimony of those writers from whom St. Augustine took it. It is enough for me that it illustrates what I wish to say; for in like manner, either through decay of time or want of care, there gathers over the mouth of the heart, if I may so speak, a certain growth of earthly desires and passions, which so firmly binds its lips, that it cannot open to heavenly food or receive divine nourishment. The royal Prophet deplores this misfortune under another figure: “I am
smitten as grass, and my heart is withered," that is, languor and old age have come upon the heart, and why? "because," he says, "I forgot to eat my bread." But why has he ceased to eat his bread? and why is it difficult? Because, he adds, "my bone hath cleaved to my flesh. The heart can no longer partake of heavenly things, for its mouth has been sealed; a hard growth has formed about its lips, brought on by self-indulgence. What think you, is the cause of this disgust we feel for spiritual things? Why does it become so painful a task for us to fix our mind on God and repress those thoughts of ours, which often wander whither we would not? It is because we did not hold them in check, when it was in our power? Whence this strong and alluring love of earthly things, of the world, of honors, of parents and our own comfort? And that I may insist on facts more than words why is it that flesh and blood so rule over the spirit in us? Why is this warfare with our internal enemy so futile and so helpless? True, we have not suffered total defeat, but we are far from that generosity and loftiness of spirit to which alone is due the honor of victory. Our weakness is the fruit of inconstant virtue. It conies of a languid spirit, and unless that spirit is aroused and strengthened in time, it is sure to fall and perish.

But where shall we find a remedy for these disorders? St. Augustine shows us in these words: "the hard rock will rid you of old age, and the rock is Christ; your youth like the eagle’s will be renewed in Christ. Age has crept upon you; the heart can no longer partake of heavenly food, for its lips are sealed; the callous growth that binds them must be worn away upon the rock, on that mysterious rock which of old, when struck with the rod, poured forth those waters that gave life to all around. While our heart thirsts, why do we not press our parched lips against this rock? And why do we not, along with the pure and wholesome air which we need, drink in the waters of life as they flow from the rock, that they may moisten and enrich our soul? “The grass will grow green again,” watered by the Savior’s blood, says St. Augustine in another place. And the Saint’s words are very true; for assiduous meditation on the sufferings of Christ in His passion and death, breaks our earthly affections upon the rock, and wears away those carnal growths, which so develop with time, that they quite close our lips to their proper food, and keep the soul from seeking God and exclaiming with the Prophet: “I opened my mouth and panted.”

I greatly desire that we should have recourse to prayer as the chief help offered us for renewal of spirit. And first we must repair whatever defects have crept into the practice of this holy exercise. So men are wont to do, when they try to revive and bring back to its former perfection an art that is well-nigh lost. They begin by preparing a workshop and fitting it up with tools and whatever is needed for their work. And surely we must know that prayer is the only workshop, where we may repair the soul and make it bright by the fire of divine love and free from the rust of spiritual decay. The inspired Psalmist exclaims: “in my meditation the fire shall burst forth;" that is to say, in meditation a flame of great virtue, intense and active, will spring forth, imparting life and warmth to the soul, till it glows with vitality and burns with its love of God.

Our holy Father Ignatius has built for us a wondrous workshop, fully equipped and furnished with most perfect instruments. If through any neglect, we have allowed these tools to rust and become unfit for use, let us hasten to repair them and make them bright again by the help of the Spiritual Exercises. And here let me exhort you, with all the earnestness I can, to the use of these Exercises, begging and
entreat you to give yourselves seriously to them, that you may thereby acquire that greatness of soul
and courage so necessary to the practice of prayer. Prayer is the greatest of all arts, and we should
cultivate it all our lives; for it will be of great avail to us not only in regaining our youth and strength,
but also in keeping far from us for the future the approach of spiritual old age.

This is the remedy offered us against the danger of spiritual decay, and without it all other helps will
be in vain. I am aware that this is no new remedy. It is an old one and well known to you. Still,
circumstances will endow it with new virtue and give it fresh power to heal. The Society in our day
abounds in spiritual helps of every sort; for not to speak of our Constitutions and Rules, which, to my
mind, contain a rich store of choice remedies against every kind of disorder, we have besides in our
Admonitions, Ordinations, and Instructions so many safe and salutary methods of cure for all cases
and occasions that may arise, that to order new remedies and give fresh prescriptions would not be to
cure the sick nor preserve the health of those who are well, but would tend rather to afflict the strong
and oppress those who are ill. However, there is one thing I desire very much, and I recommend it as
forcibly and urgently as I can, trusting that what I say will impress itself so deeply on your minds, that
nothing may ever be able to efface it, and that, as often as opportunity offers, it will show itself in all
you do. What I desire is the exact keeping of our Rules and the efficient application of the remedies
which we possess, for in this way alone shall the Society continue in the unfading bloom of youth, not
merely for a hundred years, but for all time. Listen to the beautiful words of St. Augustine: “What! shall
He not cure you, Who so made you that you would never have been sick, had you but willed to keep
the rule He gave you, on which your health depended? Did He not determine and ordain what you
were to touch and what you were to leave untouched, for the preservation of your health? You did not
wish to listen that your health might be spared, hearken that you may be healed, for you have learned
in your affliction the truth of his words.” It is a sad experience that which is acquired at the cost of a
fall, still we may draw profit from it. Let us at least, taught by experience, follow the advice we refused
at first to receive.

We see from this how necessary it is to insist on carrying out what is prescribed. Inferiors who seek to
be cured, must use the remedies and undergo the treatment prescribed for them; and superiors, on
their part, are bound in a special way to prescribe for their patients, and exact an account of their
condition and their improvement under these remedies. The spiritual health and strength of inferiors
rest to a great extent on the watchfulness of superiors; and we know that, in general, the government of
our Houses and Colleges depends much on the Rectors who are placed over them. Observance of rule,
discipline and order will be such as the Superior makes them, either lax or strict. The saying of St.
Gregory Nazianzen is most true, that “as works bespeak the workman’s skill, so the lives of subjects
reveal the hand that rules them.” I must acknowledge “my ears tingle,” as often as the words of St. Leo
recur to me: “The faults of subjects are to be referred to none more than to slothful and careless rulers,
who frequently foster sore pestilence, while they refrain from applying the needed medicine.” And the
holier the obligations are by which superiors are bound to demand discipline from their subjects, the
greater cause they have to fear, if they are negligent; for God has implanted a spirit of reverence and
docility in subjects towards those who are placed over them, and it can scarcely be told how much
harm those superiors do the service of God, who perform their work remissly. For as in the beginning
“the Lord set a mark on Cain” in token of punishment, that whosoever found him should not kill him; so, in like manner, to signify his approval, He has marked out superiors for special veneration. He has set his seal upon them, and has adorned them with every sign of honor and authority, that subjects might deem it an unholy thing to resist them. It was this “token for good” that David prayed to be adorned with, when about to crush his enemies at the command of God. Superiors should ever keep before their eyes that beautiful, though awful saying of St. Gregory, that before the dread tribunal of the Last Judgment, subjects will have to give an account of only one soul, while superiors must answer for many: “Therefore, let the superior, who is scarcely able to satisfy a stern judge for his own soul, ponder this well, for in the hour of judgment, he will be the only one who will have as many souls to answer for as he had subjects to rule over.”

Indeed, I believe that, by the favor of God, the superiors in our Society show great good will and prompt zeal in the discharge of their office; that they are most careful to insist on the carrying out of all that is prescribed for the fostering and perfecting of religious life among us, and that they leave nothing undone to effect this. Still as we are men, and subject to human frailty, it often happens, almost without our knowing it, that the rust of earthly desires secretly forms upon the soul and eats away its strength, or some bias of mind turns us a little from the straight way, and keeps us back in our progress towards God.

I will touch on a few of these points in passing. There is one defect which is very common among us and quite widespread. It is the imprudent desire we have of helping all to the gaining of perfection by the use of the same means. I know this defect springs from charity, but from an ill-regulated charity; for we do not stop to think whether our subjects will be helped or not by what we do for them, or whether our zeal for the assistance of one will bring harm to many. Hence it happens that Rectors relax in governing and pass over many things in silence, to the great detriment of discipline, deceived by this false reason, that in under taking to administer necessary correction, their attempt may end unhappily, and tend to break the delinquent’s spirit rather than lead him back to the right way. And, meantime, they do not sufficiently reflect that thus they are doing a great injury to the whole community, while they fail utterly to do the individual any good. This, surely, is not the way to help souls to sanctity, or keep them in their vocation, to grant them full license to walk at their own pleasure or neglect what they see fit. No man thinks of holding in an unmanageable horse by dropping the reins and allowing him to rush at pleasure over unbidden paths, whitherso ever impulse and wild caprice take him; but he uses the reins as occasion demands, now he gives a loose rein, again a tight one, and with pressing bit and the whip teaches the animal to obey and thus curbs his unruly spirit. That good Samaritan of whom we read in the gospel, so admirable in his piety and kindly charity, is a model for superiors who would rule well. He healed the fallen and half-lifeless man by binding, not opening, his gaping wounds; “he bound up his wounds,” the gospel tells us. Whereupon St. Ambrose remarks wisely, as is his wont, “he binds the wounds by a more stringent precept.” I do not, however, wish to be understood as though it were never right to show indulgence to a subject or overlook faults at times; for I know there are occasions when this may be even necessary, not for mere passing motives, but in the hope of a real, substantial gain to God’s glory. Still I maintain that we should act in this way very cautiously; and we should be ever on the alert, avoiding anything that might lead to harm in the community, and
shunning even the least danger of hurtful example. In general, let us cherish that excellent maxim and solid counsel of St. Augustine: “Let forbearance be watchful that discipline may never fall asleep.”

Holy Job praises the harmony of the heavens, because it is perpetual, unbroken, without rest or interval: who can make the harmony of heaven to sleep?” Our houses and colleges should be like the heavens in this, offering up to God one unbroken chorus of sweet harmony.

There is another defect, akin to this, which quite impedes good government. It comes from making too much of that maxim: “Do nothing to estrange your subjects from you or displease them.” Now this would be all very well and quite proper, if there were question only of ruling over angelic hosts. But that it may be applied as a rule of conduct for men who have to govern their fellow-men, it is not enough that their subjects live by the spirit, they should also be pure spirits and without the burden of flesh. There is a sense, however, in which this saying may be received with approval, in so far as it inculcates a spirit of paternal love and kindly disposition in superiors, and insists that they should seek real peace for their subjects and never give them true cause for pain. Still, they should always observe moderation in this and when there is need, and the service of God requires it, they should insist firmly on the accomplishment of God’s will, and fearlessly go the full length of their duty, as far as occasion demands, even though it bring grief to some and stir up loud complaints. For we know that kind fathers are often forced to give pain to the sons they love, insisting and urging and chiding, when the welfare and happiness of the family demand it. St. Gregory in speaking on this subject, says that a superior should be at once a father and a mother, and in the end concludes with this remark: “A Rector should be as a mother to his subjects by his kindness and affection, but discipline should show him as a father.” Superiors are often afraid to exercise their authority, even in the spirit of charity, or demand the performance of duties that belong to the religious life, lest they do harm to their subjects or cause them disquiet. But in this their fear is foolish and quite out of place, and there is much more reason to fear lest thereby they give just cause of offence to inferiors, because they seem to trust so little in their virtue and loyalty. We must remember that we have to do with men, who have given themselves freely and of their own accord to God, and gladly bear the yoke of Christ. They know by experience that that yoke is light, for He has made it so Who deigned to bear it first for our sakes and make trial of it in His own person, causing “the yoke to putrefy at the presence of the oil;” and though sometimes they feel that this yoke weighs heavily on them, and is a pain and burden to our weak, fickle nature, still they bear it willingly, and patiently suffer it, strengthened by the words of St. Augustine, who says that the yoke of discipline “is not the burden of one who is oppressed, but the wing of one about to fly.” Thus, like birds of Paradise, our brethren will not count their wings as a burden, albeit they are heavy, for, though they must needs bear them while at rest on earth, they are borne up by them in their flight to heaven. Let the members of the Society hear the voice of the superior with pleasure as the voice of God, exhorting them under the burden of the rule and strengthening them with the words: “Bear the wings of peace, receive the wings of charity.”

The third defect in good government may be said to arise from that special liking which superiors have for some members of their community; for in their desire to be indulgent to their friends without open show of favor, they fancy it will be best not to be over-strict with the community, and so make up their mind to be liberal in their interpretation of many things, and overlook a great deal. And if some boldly
disregard even this too human course of conduct, and make no attempt to appear impartial towards all, it is clear that any effort on their part to exact religious observance from some, while they are indulgent to others who are equally bound by the rule, will be utterly fruitless and without any good result. Hence superiors will find it a great help in the fulfilment of their office to look only to the merits and works, and not to the person of their subjects; for in this way they will find it easy to obtain from all alike, even with great kindness, the practice of common discipline. It was not without some mysterious purpose that the Patriarch Isaac was deprived of sight in the day when he was to bestow his solemn blessing upon his two sons. If he had been able to look upon his sons and distinguish them, there would have been danger lest he might make more of the promptings of his own heart than of God’s appointment, and he might have put his fond love for Esau before the merits of Jacob. Surely, he who is father of all ought not to devote to any one of his children the whole heart of love that belongs to all; nor should he give his right hand to one, and his left hand to the others; but as far as is possible he should show himself equally kind and well-disposed to all, knowing no distinction but that which God makes. His one thought should be to act by those words of our Lord: “to sit on my right hand or left hand, is not mine to give you, but to them for whom it is prepared by my Father.”

But if special affection for others can so keep superiors from their duty in exacting discipline, how much harm will be done when superiors are influenced by motives of self-love, and are at the same time over-eager to seek their own reputation and convenience? This spirit is subtle, and in its slow progress, secretly attacks the very life of religious government, robs it of vigor, till at last exhausted it falls without energy or strength. How is it possible for a superior in this state of things to rule his subjects with freedom and sweetness, or bid them in the words of the Gospel: “pay what thou owest.” But this self-love leads to something still more hurtful; for it insinuates itself into the mind and keeps it blind, so that we come to form different judgments on the same matters according as they have to do with ourselves or others. When this happens, great harm is done, and we rule no longer with holy wisdom. Surely here, if anywhere, the saying of St. Gregory is in place: “self-love quite blinds our heart; and it happens thereupon, that what we do ourselves, and deem quite proper, appears most unseemly in our eyes when done by another. How, indeed, can he who is thus blinded, enforce the Rule upon others without feeling shame, seeing that he does not hold himself bound by the same obligations. And this especially in the Society, where, thank God, the opinion has ever prevailed that superiors should lead the rest of the community in the keeping of the Rules and in every duty of the religious life; who should excel others in this only, that they bear a double burden upon their shoulders, and promote religious perfection in the community, while they themselves advance in holiness imitating in this the Beloved in the Canticles, who when about to bring his spouse into the mountain of myrrh, the abode of bitterness and grief, did not give any command other than announce to her, “I will go to the mountain of myrrh.” To be brief there is nothing that exercises such influence on religious men as the force of example. It is stronger than any word or command. Knowing this, our Divine Guide, ever so perfectly obedient to His Father’s will, nay, for that very reason called “the arm of the Lord” that He might bring us to do God’s will, “began to do and to teach” as if He considered this His real work, in place of giving laws. And since He was to teach men to be humble, to despise themselves, to love poverty, and bear affliction, it is not to be wondered at that He wished to appear
vile, poor, despised and weighed down with afflictions, thereby clearly showing superiors how victory over self-love will make them “mighty in work and word” before their subjects.

The last thing that seems to hinder those who are in authority from the proper discharge of their duty, is an over-great anxiety and solicitude about daily needs and temporal concerns. These cares are frequently a source of distraction, bringing weariness of mind and body, and oftentimes they keep us away from our community, and thus we neglect our real business, which is the guidance of our brethren in the way of virtue and perfection. And all the while superiors little reflect that they are neglecting the only real means of relief in all their wants; for there is no surer way to secure help and provide for the future, than by showing a watchful care for our Rules and Institute, and demanding of all the faithful observances of Rules, holy examples, and zeal for our neighbor’s salvation. This, indeed, is the best provision we can make, and it will prove a rich and unfailing source of revenue to our colleges. Speaking on this matter, there comes to mind a remark made by our Holy Father St. Ignatius while he was here at Rome. It seems that while in recreation on one occasion, the conversation turned on the famine from which Rome was then suffering. One of the fathers said it seemed to him a miracle, that at such a time our house, which had nothing to live on save what it got by alms, should want for nothing, while others were in such distress. “Do you look on it as a miracle?” asked the saint very gravely and in a tone of rebuke. Nay, rather, we should consider it a miracle if it were to happen otherwise; for if we but work faithfully in the divine service, seeking first our own perfection, and after that our neighbor’s, God will not be wanting on His part, nor will He forget His plighted promises ever to have a care of us.

It may be owing perhaps to these defects, and others like them, which might be enumerated here, that some of our superiors find themselves unable to obtain from those who have been entrusted to their care, that observance of rule and perfection of discipline which they desire. The defects of which we have spoken are very hurtful to a superior; for like worms hidden in the heart of a tree, they secretly prey upon their victim and eat his strength away. And though he may be well disposed and quite intent on caring for the Rules, still he will fail in his purpose, and fall among those, who, as the Prophet Isaiahs says, “are come to birth, and there is not strength to bring forth.” He is not lacking in zeal for holiness in his community. He is distressed over the faults and failings of those under him, and his heart is racked with pain when his subjects fall. And many a time he repeats the words of Blessed Cyprian: “I, too, am smitten in my members by the darts of a cruel enemy; their deadly swords pierce me through, and compassion hath laid me prostrate among my fallen brethren.” They cry out that all is not well; they lift up their voice and complain to those who should hear, as is quite right and proper; but often, too, they do what they should not, and make lament before those who ought not to hear and the result is just what St. Augustine complained of in a similar matter, “that the strong are needlessly pained, and the weak are alarmed at their peril.” But why say more! “They are come to the birth,” they have all the feelings, premonitions, pains, and anguish of one about to bring forth grand reforms in religious life. Help is offered by those whose place it is to do so, treatments are prescribed and methods proposed, still “there is not strength to bring forth;” the work proves to be abortive from sheer weakness and after all our efforts we accomplish nothing.
I know that what I have said may not be altogether called for, as I am addressing men who have followed these principles all along in practice, or at least have understood them quite well. But at the same time, I feel that I speak as one under heavenly inspiration and with the high purpose of effecting a great increase of virtue among us. Hence the knowledge of the happy results of good government, and the responsibility of my position, which forces me ever to be watchful for the Society’s welfare, may have led me, perchance, in this matter beyond becoming bounds. But my purpose may show that this zeal is not altogether unworthy of pardon; for in what I have said my one object has been to free my conscience from all scruples, at the same time reminding superiors of St. Gregory’s warning to his disciple Peter who was in Sicily: “In regard to what I have written to you on the keeping of justice, I have set my conscience free, but if you neglect my words, you are bound in conscience. You have heard what I desire. See to it how you act.”

I will add here, that subjects ought to assist superiors all they can in carrying out what is prescribed for us. This is the second thing to be looked to in the application of remedies, and has to do, as I said, with the patient who is under cure. The care of doctors will be all in vain, and it will be useless for them to prescribe medicines, however good in themselves, if the sick man refuses to take them, and will not put himself entirely in the hands of the physician. “Let us trust in God,” and those who hold his place, says St. Ambrose, “showing ourselves quite ready to take whatever remedies he may advise, for He knows what is best for all our troubles. See how those who suffer in body long to be healed, and submit to the doctor in everything. How eager they are to prevent delay, they present themselves of their own accord, that the operation may be performed the sooner.” Nay more, they are willing, if it be necessary, to be bound, in order to facilitate the operation and secure its success. This is that long martyrdom of the soul, and not of blood, which the saints attribute to the religious life. “Our life of peace has its martyrs, too,” says St. Augustine; “for to repress anger, check the passions, keep justice, spurn avarice, and put down pride (which is the aim and purpose of our Rules) is the better part of martyrdom,” and if it does not quite bring death, it surely tries the soul.

In the early ages of the Church, the martyrs who are the proud boast of our faith, gladly welcomed the display of instruments of torture set before their eyes to fill them with dread. Those noble souls had no choice, nor any fear, and heeded not in what form death came to them. They embraced their crosses, and kissed the chains that bound them. They pressed the scourges and goads to their breast, and unbidden fixed the iron bonds upon their sacred hands and necks. So, too, should the martyrs of the religious life, as St. Leo says, welcome the instruments of their torture, exalting them to the honors of their triumph. Nor ought they to rest content with merely showing themselves ready to accept the bonds of regulations and rules, but should bind them on, rejoicing and glorying in them, embracing them in transports of holy joy; and this the more gladly, because they are the bonds of our own choice, and golden chains which most loving fathers have put upon their children, that while they are thus bound for a little while here below, they may be able to give their hearts and minds more generously to God, Who will soon be their great reward. To this King David invites us in two expressive words, as rich in meaning as they are concise, “Embrace discipline.” St. Hilary thus develops this expression: By these words, he says, the Prophet shows us the promptness and holy impatience that should animate us; he teaches us that we should not so much seek discipline as embrace it; that in the practice of
obedience we ought not to be content with a languishing faith, but full of fervor we should embrace the law with holy zeal.” While reflecting on this saying of the Psalmist, concerning the alacrity we should show in doing what obedience orders and embracing its commands as sweet chains that bind us, we should not forget the words of Origen which are so apposite: “We must embrace discipline,” he says, “and clasp it in our arms, lest it escape us or fall to earth,” and with it the religious life itself, which rests wholly upon discipline. St. Gregory Nazianzen called the first martyrs by that beautiful title “the world’s bonds,” for their constancy in the faith joined and bound the world to God. In like manner, I do not hesitate to call the later martyrs of religious obedience the bonds of the Society; for they maintain the Society, and keep its members united and bound to Christ “by the cords of Adam, with the bands of love,” that is, by the holy bonds of our Rules. And it is clear what harm and confusion will come to the Society, if these ties are loosened or broken.

For this reason, our holy Father St. Ignatius, insists much on submission to superiors and perfect compliance with their will, and he seems to make the welfare and happiness of his children depend on this. He expresses this thought very clearly in his golden letter on obedience, in which he likens the Society to the heavens, and bids us imitate the harmony which reigns there. For in the heavens, the higher bodies impart motion to those nearest them, and these in turn to those below, and all things move on in due order and rapidity, so that the body nearest us, not only suffers itself to be influenced in its revolutions by the earth, but is even borne along in its orbit under an irresistible impulse.

Nowhere, surely, is God better served than in the heavens, where all things do His will; nowhere else are his commands so quickly heard, or executed with such rapidity and precision. The holy Prophet saw this, and in admiration cried out: “Thy word standeth firm in heaven, O Lord.” St. Hilary makes an excellent remark on this passage, which illustrates and quite confirms what we have said. It will be well to consider his words, for he, too, like our holy Father Ignatius, sends us to the school of the heavens to learn perfect obedience. “There,” says the Saint, “is no transgression, no change, no languor, no repose; look upon the course of the sun, the phases of the moon, the position of the stars, their movements and evolutions. Do they not keep within their bounds, never breaking from the prescribed limits, or departing from the path marked out for them? Change is not known there nor delay, nor neglect of any kind, for everything is fixed, and all move on in one unwearyed round of obedience to established law. “We must believe,” he adds, “that in like manner, the word of God also stands firm in the Saints who throng around His throne.”

All the world knows that we have been placed in a heaven of beauty and magnificence that has no equal; in a heaven, to use the language of St. Peter Chrysologus, “whose dawn is our mother the Society, whose sun is our holy Father Ignatius; and its stars are seen in the dazzling brightness of the virtues of our Brethren, who all these years have shed their glory over many lands. The light of day beams in our Mother’s look; upon our Father’s face burns the splendor of the sun; and the eyes of our companions are as stars that shine beyond the reach of darkness. The gloom of evil cannot reach those, who live in the lustre of so many virtues.”
If, however, by some strange phenomenon, there should appear in the firmament of religious like a meteor, formed from the foul and pestilential exhalations of the world, whose presence is all too near, that firmament is not, therefore, to be condemned. It is no sign that those heavens are about to fall, because that igneous body has kindled its deadly fires amid kindly and propitious stars; for we see similar phenomena from time to time in the visible sky above us; and even in the heaven of heavens, in the august abode of Divinity, and under the very eye of God, even there, baneful luminaries have been found and many stars have fallen. These strange things have happened in all systems however exalted. St. Augustine shows this clearly, and with much eloquence, in one of his most beautiful letters, which I should like each of you to read at leisure for the consolation of your soul. As for myself, from all my heart and with much fervor, I pray our Lord Jesus Christ, who presides over the firmament of our religious life and rules all its movements, to keep these meteoric bodies from passing across the path of our heavens. However, as I was about to say, if it must happen that now and then some should appear, let us take consolation in this, that their passage is rapid and of short duration, and that they have become “vain in their thoughts,” and faded from view, before they have had time to harm us by their malign influence. That no folly or madness may ever lead us to their distress, we should ever bear well in mind the wise counsel of St. Peter Chrysologus: “Let reverence for our Father hedge us round;” that reverence and homage due our illustrious Founder, St. Ignatius, who has been to us so good and loving a father; let us find our strength in tender, deep affection for our Mother,” the Society, for we would be most ungrateful children not to make this return for the love she bears us; and let the presence of our brethren ever keep us.” Let us build our lives on the models they have set us, following the heroic examples they have left in the practice of every virtue. Let us shun all that might imperil our good name and splendid reputation.

Not to entertain these holy aspirations, bespeaks a heart without love and dead to every noble feeling; for he surely either does not know his mother, the Society, or is not worthy to be counted among her children, who does not seek her glory and welfare.

God has inspired me with a very great desire to see the Society fulfil the wish of its founder, and shine as the heavens bright with stars. May the Society shine on earth, and may the splendor of its beams never be impaired by the presence of wandering stars or baneful meteors, since the Prophet Isaias calls the stars of heaven a host, or an army ranged in battle.

If it be true and we cannot doubt it that “they who instruct many to justice,” which is our special work, “shall shine as stars for all eternity,” why do we not exert ourselves to merit this title and acquire so fair a portion? Why do we not secure for ourselves this glory by showing in our lives the virtues of the stars? “The sun was raised up, and the moon stood still in her order.” This is the beautiful reading which the septuagint version gives of this passage of the Prophet Habacuc, and it falls in well with our present purpose. It is quite clear how the first part of the text has been verified; for the sun, our Father Ignatius has been raised by God to a place among the saints, and has been set on high and clothed round about with undying glory in the kingdom of light; and as we gaze upon him, his splendor floods the earth and grows in brightness from day to day. As to the second part of the text, it remains for us to accomplish it by our virtuous lives: “and the moon stood still in her order.” By the moon, the doctors of
the Church understand also the stars. “Our order,” so speaks the eloquent St. Bernard on this passage, “is lowliness, humility, voluntary poverty, obedience, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. Our order is to be under rule and discipline; to train ourselves by prayer, and above all things to hold the more excellent way of charity.”

It is my wish and the fond desire of my heart that we may all shine as bright stars, abiding in the “order” fixed for us, and shedding joy and gladness all around; little heeding what our place may be, ready to work in our colleges and schools, or go on distant missions and wander over strange lands far from our native shores, as it shall seem good to Him who has called us to the Society. Would that we were like the stars in their rich poverty! They possess nothing as their own, gather not, and hoard no treasure; they seek no conveniences, and are well content with the common lot of all. Each night and our nights for them are days they receive the needs of life according to place and measure, and ever in unvarying round have from the sun that borrowed light with which they shine resplendent. Oh, that we had their unwearied charity that knows no fatigue! for they come and go, and die each day a kind of death. They fade and waste away for the good of man and his pleasure. Would that we had that single bond of unity which is theirs! for they have their life and all their splendor from one source alone, and their radiance is but a reflex of its glory. Would that we enjoyed their peerless beauty! for they shine in heaven with all the effulgence of purest light, so free from blemish, that we cannot even imagine them other than bright and spotless. Would that we had that modesty, that love of solitude, that forgetfulness of self, which delights in concealment, and hides from view all its good and noble works, that they may not be seen by men.” Would, too, that we had that prompt obedience of the stars, ever ready and eager to do what is commanded. The Prophet tells us that the stars “were called and they said: Here we are; and with cheerfulness they have shined forth to Him that made them.” Oh, if we had but that spirit, then indeed would obedience be our light, and we should deem that all our splendor consisted in this, that we fulfill with holy gladness the orders that are given us; that we perform with very great zeal what God demands of us, never suffering ourselves to be influenced by considerations of time, place, or work; refusing nothing, seeking nothing; never forcing superiors to yield to us, nor urging our wishes openly or covertly, by ourselves or others; appearing in public when there is need, and then showing ourselves without affectation or fear before men; equally disposed, when occasion offers, to go back into retirement, and disappear from the gaze of men; utterly indifferent what our rank may be, well content to hold the first place or the last, finding all our joy in that position which our Lord and Master has fixed for us.

This is the very counsel that St. Gregory Nazianzen gives: “Let each one keep the place that has been assigned him, even though he be worthy to go higher, for he will gain more merit in resting content with the position given him, than in seeking another which he has not.” And the Saint’s closing words are quite in keeping with what we have been saying in connection with the stars. “Let no one,” he continues, “expose himself to danger by going ahead to find the way, when he is free to follow the lead of another without risk; let him keep the law of obedience, for that law is the security and support of all things in heaven and on earth.”
Our holy Founder bids us cherish these sacred thoughts, and recommends the heavens as a school, where we may learn the practice of every virtue. This, I fancy, was the lesson he sought to learn, when he kept watch far into the night, gazing up at the clear sky and dwelling in spirit among the stars, whose brilliancy and beauty filled him with contempt for all the beauty earth had to show. He felt in himself the wisdom of St. Augustine’s words: “if you wish to be like heaven, banish earth from your heart.” Our saintly Father drew much profit from these hours of contemplation; and it is no wonder that he should bid his children “look up to heaven and number the stars,” since he himself set us the example. Philo, the Jew, seems to think that these words, which God spoke of old to Abraham, are meant to express the virtues and qualities of the stars, and not merely their numbers. He tells us that the reason of that pleasure we take in gazing on this beautiful spectacle is found in that insatiable desire we have of virtue. We bear about within us from our birth the impress of every virtue, a gift from the hand of God; for God, he says, “has put into the soul seeds of beauty and glory and immortality, even as He has fixed the stars in heaven.” So, in like manner, the same writer maintains that those other words which God spoke to Abraham: “I will make of thee a great nation, and I will multiply thy seed as the stars of heaven,” refer not so much to the multitude of his descendants, as to their progress and improvement: that is to say, they foretell a goodly race, grown mighty in virtue as well as numbers. We ought not, therefore, to felicitate ourselves overmuch, because, in the short lapse of a hundred years, our Society has filled the old world and has even spread beyond into the new. It is not necessary that we should compute our numbers or learn how many we are; but it is all important that we should know how far we are become virtuous and full of zeal for our own salvation and that of our neighbor; that we should examine whether we always give good example, whether we are solicitous for God’s glory and faithful to our Constitutions and holy Rules; for this is what it means to become “a great nation” even “as the stars in heaven” God in giving his blessing to Abraham, did not attach great importance to the countless multitude of his descendants. He did not say, as Philo remarks in the same place, I will make of thee a vast nation, but a great nation. For He knew that mere numbers would not make a faultless people. Wisdom, too, and knowledge must be added, that is virtue and perfection, and by these gifts alone shall our greatness and excellence be like to the grandeur and beauty of the stars. I trust it was in the hope of this development and growth in sanctity, that our Lord, Who has been pleased in His mercy to watch over this least Society, promised to St. Ignatius from the beginning: “I will multiply thy seed as the stars of heaven, and I will bless these.” And on our part, how many motives there are to urge us to advance, as living stars, in the path of light, in perfection, regularity and obedience! If we neglect these virtues, we must fear that terrible threat of our Lord: “the stars shall fall from heaven.”

But these stars shall never fall, nor shall ruin ever come upon the heavens that encircle them, if only these heavens, and the stars too, “stand firm in their order;” that is to say, if only the Society keep its lowly place as the least among all the Religious Orders. Our holy Founder, in his pre-eminent self-contempt, loved to call the Order he founded, this least Society. And we may rest assured that our Order will find security only in the firm belief and profession of its lowliness and weakness. “We must shun pride,” to quote the beautiful words of St. Leo, “for pride is ever near a fall; we must love humility, for it leads to elevation.” Let the Society, therefore, cherish this modest title, and much more let it foster the spirit of humility, as the source of all its life and the fixed centre about which all should
turn. Let the Society seek only the glory of God, and labor unsparingly for the good of souls; let it speak little of itself, and ever pay becoming respect and veneration to the older Orders. Let it show sweet charity to other religious bodies, and give them on all occasions every mark of esteem, and, conformably to our Institute, take pleasure in serving them and putting itself below them. But, above all, let it be in perfect harmony with that supreme and august body, which gives life and being to our Order and the whole religious world. Let the Society, I say, be in perfect accord with holy Church and its visible Head on earth, the Sovereign Pontiff, to whom our Blessed Father Ignatius has closely bound us, consecrating us to his service by a special vow. Let us understand well, that the more the Society fosters deep attachment and devotion to the holy See, as it is bound to do, the more it clings to the chair of Peter, and pays homage to Christ’s Vicar, obeying him with love and zeal a duty which I cannot too earnestly impress on you the more will the Society be without fear in the midst of insults and the assaults of enemies, the more will it participate in that great and splendid promise: “the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”

And here I bring to a close the thoughts I wished to call to your attention. I have written this letter under the inspiration of very deep feeling and affection, and with my heart’s blood, if I may so speak. Something tells me it is the last letter I shall ever address to the whole Society. And as the last words of men are wont to make a more lively impression and remain longer in the memory of those who hear them, I earnestly pray that these words of mine may sink deep into our hearts, beloved fathers and brothers, and be firmly graven “in the fleshy tables of the heart,” for they have been dictated by the ardent desire I feel of seeing you reach very high perfection in the exact observance of our Rules. So I end with the words of Josue spoken long ago to his people: “I am old, and far advanced in years; and now since He hath divided to you by lot all the land, from the east of the Jordan unto the great sea.” How clearly God has favored the Society during the course of this century! We are aware of His goodness and bounty, almost as though we saw it with our eyes. How many lands and how many peoples He “hath divided” unto us, even to the great sea and the farthest Indies! How He has blessed the labors and fatigues of His servants in the conversion of nations! How He has sustained them in battle against the enemies of His holy name! Who can recall all these countless, precious favors, without shedding tears of gratitude. Still let us not rest with this; many nations yet remain to be conquered; “the Lord your God will destroy them before your face,” and through your valor will subject them to His yoke, as the glad consummation of all your zeal. This, however, He expects of you in return, “only take courage, and be careful to observe all things that are written in the book of the law of Moses; and turn not aside from them neither to the right hand nor to the left.”

Truly, God demands but little from us for the many great blessings He has conferred on us in the past, and still promises us in the future. He asks us merely to keep faithfully and observe exactly the rules which He has given us by His servant Ignatius and his successors. If you but do this, I give you the solemn assurance that you shall become “a great nation, and as the stars of heaven.” “Behold this day I am going into the way of all the earth, and you shall know with all your mind that of all the words which the Lord promised to perform for you, not one hath failed.” So it will be, I trust, by the help and favor of Him who knows how to find a way to accomplish what He ordains.
Therefore, in the midst of the rejoicings of this anniversary, I desire that all, superiors as well as subjects, should consecrate some time to retreat; and while following the Exercises of our holy Father, as I advised before, it would be well to look to our Rules, and go over in detail the Decrees and Ordinations of the Generals. I recommend in particular the re-reading and careful consideration of the letter which I addressed to all the Provinces soon after it pleased God to put on me this burden of office. Weigh well each point, and let nothing escape you; use the utmost care to find out whether anything needs to be corrected; whether obedience to rule has suffered in any way or grown languid, and whether the religious spirit flourishes and continues in its first vigor. And if on examination we find that religious observance has been at all impaired, with stout hearts and generous purpose, let us strive to make good the defect; and quickened by the remembrance of the many blessings we had enjoyed, let us work together, each in his own way, to maintain the Institute in all its integrity; inferiors, by yielding a ready and cheerful obedience in all things, carefully keeping the observance of the Order, as St. Bernard says, “that the Order may keep us;” and superiors, on their part, by insisting much on that observance; but always sweetly, with paternal love and a charity begotten of God, that their diligence may show firmness rather than rigor, and preserve that measure of which St. Gregory speaks, when he recommends that “vigor should give strength to mildness, and mildness sweeten the vigor of discipline; and thus each will be an offset to the other, so that vigor may never degenerate into severity, nor mildness into weakness.” Let all be fully persuaded that nothing is more injurious to good government in religious bodies than inflexible harshness and undue severity; while, on the other hand, all things yield to unbending firmness duly tempered with sweetness.

Let us remember, dear Fathers and Brothers, that the welfare of the Society rests upon each of us, for it is undoubtedly true, that we have in our hands the strength and the means to preserve the Society. And let us not forget that up to this we have lived on the glory won by the virtues and heroic deeds of our ancestors, and that to their merits we owe the splendid reputation which we enjoy among men. On us it now devolves, as we enter on another century, to infuse new life and energy into our work, and make fresh efforts in the way of sanctity. On us it devolves to establish ourselves so solidly in perfection, and raise so proud a monument of enduring virtue, that our successors may never be tempted to part with the heritage left them, for seeing us so near they will fix their gaze on us, and follow closely in our footsteps, treading the path we trod, whether it be straight or crooked.

I must here tell you of a favor which the Sovereign Pontiff Urban VIII, has bestowed on us, as a special mark of the love and esteem he bears us; and though I mention it only at the end of my letter, I am sure you will find it not the least among the incentives to fresh progress in virtue at this time. His Holiness, in token of approval, has kindly deigned to honor by his presence and his benediction the ceremonies of thanksgiving held in gratitude to God for the blessings He has brought us during these hundred years; and wishing to make this happy occasion one of sweet remembrance and very fruitful for us, he has granted a Jubilee to the whole Society, for its preservation and progress in the service of God. That this great favor may bring with it abundant and lasting fruit, I earnestly pray and exhort you all, and, as far as I can, entreat you to prepare for it by going through the Spiritual Exercises with fervor, and especially, by making a very sincere and generous confession of your whole life past in the Society, or
of that portion which has elapsed since your last general confession, as each one finds therein more consolation and profit in our Lord.

I leave the choice of the day on which to gain the indulgence of the Jubilee to the convenience and piety of each one, and to the prudence of superiors, who will direct all things wisely. Still, I cannot refrain from saying that it would afford me great consolation if all could be ended for the approaching feast of our holy Father Saint Ignatius, or within the octave. I would wish thus to crown his triumph, and procure for him upon his feast that greatest of joys and honors, to see the daughter so dear to his heart, and so tenderly beloved by him, appearing before him in all that fairness and beauty she had in the hour of her birth, “not having spot or wrinkle, or any such thing.” May our heavenly Father who “has called us,” through His faithful servant Ignatius, “to the Society of His son,” grant in His mercy that we may also be transformed into the likeness of His son through the grace of this Jubilee.

Once more, dear Fathers and Brothers, in that deep love I bear you, I embrace you all most tenderly in Christ Jesus, to whose sweet mercy I commend you, in the hope that He will bless you in this renewal of spirit and give you new strength in His service. But first let me say with St. Bernard, that “in return for this letter, I ask an answer from your charity, and one of deed, not of word;” and I fondly beg in the words of Saint Gregory, that great master in the art of self-contempt, “that those who read this letter may grant me the solace of their prayers before a stern judge, and wash away with their tears whatever stains may be found in me.” Meanwhile I know, that comparing my letter with the prayers that shall be said for me, my readers will give me in return far more than I give them, seeing that they pay me in tears for the poor words I have spoken.

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

The servant of all in Christ,

MUTIUS VITELLSCHI.

Rome,

Nov. 15, 1639

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