

On Making the Visitation

by Teresa of Avila

1. I confess my imperfect obedience. Though I desire the virtue of obedience more than anything else, Beginning this work has been very difficult for me. May it please our Lord that I succeed in saying something, for I trust only in His mercy and in the humility of the one who ordered me to write this, so that, through humility, God, who is powerful, will do the work and not depend on me.

2. It seems an inappropriate thing to begin speaking of worldly matters. Yet I think that these are most important for the promotion of the spiritual good, although it doesn't seem to be so in monasteries founded in poverty. But, in all monasteries, it is necessary to have good order and attend to matters concerning government and the harmonious organization of all.

3. First, the visitator is to behave toward the nuns on the one hand in an affable and loving manner, but on the other, he makes it known that in essential matters he will be strict and not at all lenient. Nothing harms a visitator as much as being not feared and allowing subjects to deal with him as with an equal. This is especially true with women. Once they know he is soft, that he will pass over their faults and change his mind to not sadden them, he will have great difficulty in governing them.

4. It must be understood that there is someone in command, who is not tenderhearted when it comes to matters that could weaken religious observance. The judge must be upright in administering justice and will not turn aside from what might be more perfect and for the greater good of God even if the whole world crumbles.

It is necessary that he show compassion and be affable and loving toward them and that he love them as a father, to console and not alienate them.

5. The official visitation should take place once a year so that, with love, faults may be gradually corrected and removed. If nuns do not understand that those who have committed faults will be corrected and punished, year after year goes by and the result is that religious observance becomes

lax and it becomes impossible to provide a remedy.

Though the fault lies with the prioress, the nuns grow accustomed to the relaxation in observance. In our human nature, habit is a terrible thing, and gradually, through small things, irremediable harm is done to the order. The visitator who does not provide a remedy in time will have to give a terrible accounting to God.

6. It seems that by dealing with these matters I am offending the monasteries of the Virgin, our Lady, as they are far removed from any need for this severity. But I say this because with time, through lack of carefulness in the beginning, laxity usually creeps into monasteries. In some communities there may be problems if the visitator has not done the necessary to remedy the little things and/or removing the prioresses not suited for the job.

7. There must be no pity because though a prioress may be very holy, she might not be suited to the job. It is necessary to remedy the matter quickly. Here, where there is mortification and humility, this will not be taken as an offense. Anyone who has so little perfection that she wants to be prioress should not be governing souls who are so much involved in the pursuit of perfection.

8. The visitator must keep God in mind and cast out all feelings of pity, the greatest cruelty he could show to the nuns.

9. It's impossible that all those elected prioress will have the talent for the office, they need to be removed within the first year. Not much harm is done in the first year, but allow three to go by and she could destroy the monastery by allowing imperfection to become the norm.

The visitator must put his feelings aside and remove her from office even if it kills him. If he see the nuns solicit or campaign, he should nullify the election and nominate prioresses from other monasteries for them to choose from. No good can come from an election done in this way.

10. The visitator must examine carefully and attentively the financial records and not pass over them lightly, especially in houses having an income. It is very important that expenses don't exceed income...

If the community begins to go into debt, it will gradually be ruined. For in the event of great need, it will seem inhuman to major

superiors to forbid individuals to keep money earned from their work or that relatives provide for them, now seen in different monasteries. I would prefer that a monastery be dissolved than reach such a state. This is what I mean then about a lack of care in temporal or worldly matters can cause great harm in spiritual matters. In monasteries founded in poverty, the visitor should examine and advise strongly so that the nuns do not go into debt. They will not be in want --- unless they spend too much.

11. In all monasteries, those founded in poverty and those having an income, the visitor should learn in detail about the ration of food the nuns are given and about how they are treated, especially the sick, and he should see to it that the needs of the nuns are taken care of. The prioress needs to have courage and diligence learned through experience.

12. In both types of monasteries, he should take note of the work that each nun is doing and what the nuns have earned by the work of their hands. This is useful for two reasons: first, to encourage and thank those who have done a great deal; second, so that in monasteries where there is not much care taken about work, the nuns may be told about what others earn.

Keeping these records has not only temporal or worldly benefit, it also has other benefits as well. It is very consoling to the nuns when they are at work to know that it will be seen by the visitor, though not an important matter, we women, who live so enclosed a life and whose consolation is found in pleasing the visitor should be treated with a sensitive understanding of our weaknesses.

13. He should inquire if there is any excess in gift giving, especially in houses with an income. If the prioress is extravagant, the nuns could be left without food, as has happened. It is necessary to reflect and to have a reasonable and fixed amount for everything.

14. He should not easily consent to houses that are too large, or allow the nuns to go into debt in order to build or add on to them. It would be necessary to give the order that no construction be undertaken without informing the major superior and giving an account of where it is to be done so that he may judge whether or not to give the permission. It is better the nuns suffer not

having a good house than that they worry because of debts and lack of food.

15. It is very important that he always inspect the whole house to determine how recollection is preserved. It is necessary to think of all the evil that could arise so that the occasion can be removed.

He should observe if there are two grates at the grille in the parlor, one on the outside and one on the inside and that a hand cannot reach through. This is very important.

He should look at the confessional and see that the curtains are nailed over the confessional window and that the Communion window is small.

The entrance door should have two bolts and there should be two keys for the door to the enclosure, one kept by the portress and the other by the prioress. It is always necessary that these things be looked into and that the nuns see the visitor does so to avoid carelessness.

16. It is very important that he inquire about the chaplain, who the confessor is and whether there is more communication with him than necessary. He should ask this from the nuns and also about the preservation of recollection in the house... If a nun be tempted to misjudge, he can inquire about the truth from the other nuns by putting them under obedience. Once the truth be known, he should severely reprimand the nun who misjudged so that it will not happen again.

17. If some nuns are involved in trifles or exaggerate things, it is necessary to be strict with them and get them to realize their own blindness so as not to be disturbed. If they realize the futility of their behavior, they will be quiet. For the sake of peace and quiet, the simplicity of perfect obedience is a great help. Some nuns could think they know better than the prioress and they could do much harm to themselves. The discreet visitor will recognize this and help them improve, although if they are melancholic he will have a great deal to do. He should never be softhearted with them, for if they think they will get somewhere, they will never stop being a bother, nor will they themselves be at rest. They must realize always that they will be punished and that they must consequently support the prioress.

18. If a nun would want to transfer to another monastery, he must answer for all to understand that this is not possible. They

should not think this no matter how great their reasons. If however, a transfer has to be made, they must not think it was because they wanted it. They need never know the reason for the transfer or she will never settle down anywhere and much harm will be done to other nuns. The nuns must understand that the visitator will never trust the nun who is trying to get a transfer. Should he have to transfer her, he will not do so if she is trying for one.

These temptation never come except to melancholics (depressives) or to those of such a temperament that they are not much help for anything. To avoid these issues, he might speak in a conference to the community about how harmful this is and of the poor opinion he will have of the one who considers this temptation. He should give his reasons and explain how no one any longer can be transferred.

19. He should inquire if the prioress has a special friendship with a nun and so does more for her than for the others. He shouldn't bother with the rest unless there is an extreme case. Since our human nature doesn't allow us to recognize ourselves for what we are, each nun thinks she is an expert. It will seem to them that this nun, or these others, are governing the prioress. The visitator should strive to moderate any excess that there may be in this friendship but the friendship should not be taken away entirely, for, as I say, these persons could be the kind for whom it is necessary. However, it is always good to insist that there be no great familiarity with anyone. Soon the true colors will be seen.

20. There are some so perfect, in their opinion, that everything they see seems to be a fault, and they are always the one who have more faults themselves. They don't see them and so they put all the blame on the prioress or the others. They could fool the visitator into wanting to correct what is being done well. It is best then to avoid believing one nun alone.

In a monastery where there is so much rigor, life could become unbearable if each visitator, on each visitation, were to make new rules. This is very important. Therefore, no decrees should be made unless it is a very serious matter and the community is fully aware of the correction he wants to make. For the nuns could become so weighed down

with decrees that, unable to observe them, they give up on what is more important in the rule.

21. What the visitator should insist upon is that the nuns observe the constitutions. A prioress who takes liberty in breaking the laws of the constitutions will do great harm to the house. Time will prove it. Monasteries paying little attention to small matters, fall in very great ones. The visitator should insist publicly with the nuns to inform him of any fault in the constitutions and if he should learn of something later, he will severely punish the one who should have told him. With this, the prioress will be fearful and proceed carefully.

22. Let the prioress understand that this method is always to be followed and that is the principle reason she was elected to office. I hold that it is impossible for any prioress to fulfill her office well if she becomes upset that the visitator learned of something she does.

A sign that something is not done fully for the service of God is that I do not want it known by the one who stands in his place. So, it is important to note if there is openness and truth in the things the nuns discuss with him. He should strive by means of warnings to the prioress, and other means, to foster this openness. Though the nuns may not lie, they can cover up things. It isn't right for the nuns to hide what must be corrected from the visitator, for a good body can do nothing without a head, and he is not less than that.

23. I conclude this matter by saying that if the constitutions are observed all will be run smoothly. If there is not great care for their observance or that of the rule, visitations will be of little avail---this is the reason for them. The nuns in the community may be transferred and others brought in who are faithful in keeping the religious observance. The former nuns should be divided and each placed in a different monastery, for one or two of them will not be able to do much harm in a well-regulated monastery.

24. Some prioresses may ask for freedoms against the constitutions or it may simply not good to admit them. The visitator must know that we can exaggerate to get what we want. For this reason, it is best to keep the door closed to anything not in conformity with the way things are going and have been proven by experience. The certain is better than the

doubtful. In these cases, the visitor must be firm and not afraid to say no. He must act with holy authority, indifferent to whether he pleases or displeases in matters that could more trouble in the future.

25. Nuns should not be received until the visitor has received a full account. He should inquire himself as the prioress may be inclined to admit an aspirant because she is a friend or relative. She may think she is right but is wrong.

26. Any mistake admitting nuns can be easily remedied. But before allowing them to make profession, it is necessary to be most careful. If there are novices, the visitor should inquire about them to be able to make an informed judgment when the time comes to grant the license for profession.

Perhaps the novice is a protégé or friend of the prioress. The nuns may not speak their mind but they will to the visitor.

All must be done to avoid keeping someone in the monastery who will cause trouble and restlessness all her life.

27. Care must be taken in receiving lay Sisters and the visitor should not yield right away if he doesn't see a need. Great harm can be done if prudence is not practiced.

28. An effort should always be made in each house that there be vacancies. By no means should one consent to go beyond the fixed number as this would result in the destruction of the monastery.

If the house in question is full, and another has room, a nun could transfer to make room for an aspirant.

The provincial be informed when permission is sought concerning the number of nuns. Let him decide what is fitting. In something so important it is better not to trust the prioresses.

29. It is also necessary for the visitor to inquire if the prioress has added obligatory prayers or penances. It is important to not burden the nuns risking to cause them to lose their health. The nuns dare not speak, nor should they but only to the visitor.

30. He should note how vocal prayer is said in choir, chanted or recited. Chanting in a soft voice is in conformity with the life we profess. Chanting with a loud voice is doubly harmful: first, it sounds bad; second, the reserve and spirit of our way of life are lost.

The voices should be subdued and not manifest any concern on the part of the nuns about sounding nice to those listening. This concern has become universal, fashionable and thus it is necessary to stress the above a great deal.

31. In regard to important commands, the visitor should order a nun, under obedience, in front of the prioress, to write to him if any of the commands is not observed. So the visitor would in a way be present, for the nuns will proceed more carefully to not go against any of his orders.

32. Before the visitation takes place he should stress how wrong it would be for the prioresses to take offense at Sisters who tell the visitor of faults they have seen. Though they may be incorrect in their judgment, they are obliged to do this. In a place where mortification is the practice, it is a sure sign that a prioress is not fit to govern if she takes offense at the nuns because of a deed that should please her because it helps her better serve our Lord and fulfill her office. The next time, these nuns won't speak for fear of trouble, and then all could grow lax. The visitor should make his remarks and should not be trustful in this matter, for our human nature is weak.

33. It is most fitting that the visitor observe great secrecy in everything and that the prioress be unable to ascertain who the informer is. For these nuns are still on earth. And if, for no other reason, he should do so at least for the sake of removing a temptation, especially if it could do harm.

34. If possible, the visitor, if the issues told by the nuns are not important, make it known in a roundabout way so the prioress won't suspect he had been informed by the nuns. It is better to let her think that the nuns have nothing against her. In more serious situations, it is best that the situation be corrected than that the prioress be pleased.

35. The visitor must inquire if any money passes through the hands of the prioress without the key-bearers knowing or even whether she possesses something not in keeping with the Constitutions. This is also necessary in houses founded in poverty...

36. It may be bothersome for the visitor to attend to so many trifling matters, but if he doesn't do so, he will eventually have to deal with the backsliding that will occur.

The most important thing in the government of women is that they understand that he cannot be manipulated and that he will comply with all that pertains to religious observance and will punish what doesn't comply with it.

He makes a visitation once a year taking an interest in daily life, in this way they will grow in perfection, for women in general are upright and fearful.

37. There is to be no carelessness.

Punishment will deter others from making the same mistake. If out of compassion, the visitor is lax in the beginning, when things are small, he will have to take more severe action later. These acts of pity will turn out to be the greatest cruelty. He will have to render an exact account to God, our Lord.

38. There are some nuns with such great simplicity that they think it a fault to tell the visitor about the prioresses faults, but they are obliged to do so. They may tell her beforehand if they think she isn't observing the Constitutions as she might not even realize it. They may even tell her to correct it. If afterwards she becomes displeased with them, they should accuse her. There is much ignorance concerning these visitations and it is up to the visitor to call their attention to this and instruct them.

39. It is important to inquire about procedures concerning the confessor from all the nuns, especially about how much power he is given. It is important that communication with him be moderate, the less the better. It is also important for the prioress to avoid gift giving unless very small. The prioress should rather pay the chaplain more as gift giving brings with it many troubles.

40. It is necessary to counsel the prioress not to be too generous and liberal in spending money. They are no more than stewards and must spend with great care. She is obliged to take charge of temporal or worldly matters. She should not keep for herself what the others don't have unless the key to a desk or drawer for keeping papers.