

The spirit of the child of Bethlehem

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My dear brothers and sisters!

Through the Holy Church we have received our constitutions, which must form our law of life. We have committed ourselves to these constitutions through an oath. But if we want to keep our word, then we must be filled with the spirit that animates and summarises the many regulations, the spirit that leads us beyond the letter of the written statutes to the ideal that God has given to our dear Society of Bethlehem.

"It is the spirit of that marvellous simplicity and plainness which our Lord Jesus Christ taught from the cradle in Bethlehem and by which he put to shame the pride and vanity of the world, giving the example of humility, poverty, obedience and, above all, of immeasurable love for his heavenly Father and the souls entrusted to him". Const. n. 7.

It is the spirit of childlikeness. However, this does not mean remaining undeveloped, immature. It does not mean passivity and a lack of active power. How then could the Lord have placed a child in the midst of the

apostles and said: "Unless you become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven".

A child is plain and simple, without argument or falsity. It accepts the facts as a matter of course and comes to terms with them. What it does is done without pomposity and ego-emphasis. People do not need to pay attention to or admire its play and work. His obedience and his integration into the family, even in hardship and poverty, is so natural. His obedience and his integration into the family, even in hardship and poverty, is so natural, so simple and sincere that it involuntarily captures our hearts.

What is natural in the child, partly resulting from inexperience and powerlessness, should be consciously striven for and fought for in the man in the battle against instincts, against false culture, against inner and outer enemies. Incidentally, the sense of childlike simplicity and unpretentiousness is deeply rooted in the mature and good man. In fact, all the moulding by over-refined and false culture is incapable of stifling the desire for childlike simplicity, especially in the nobler people. The esteem and striving for the soul attitude of the good child is ultimately rooted in the nature of humans and men, and is worthy of the highest praise. However, this childlikeness requires tremendous strength and high moral endeavour. After all, it is a lofty goal to approach all circumstances of our lives in the spirit of a good child. To come to terms with everything as a matter of course. With his honesty and truthfulness, not to deceive himself or others or to bend demands. With his simplicity, not to

wish and make a fuss and wait for recognition. With his sincerity, he does not market or reserve anything for himself. With his unreserved devotion, he does not ponder for a long time whether a sacrifice is worthwhile, but with childlike faith and childlike love gives himself completely to God and his guidance. Is this childlikeness not a tremendous moral achievement and yet full of "marvellous simplicity and plainness"?

Everyone who wants to attain eternal salvation must have this spirit of childlikeness up to a certain point. But our society presents this spirit as our spirit, as our ideal. Firstly because we are supposed to acquire this spirit to the greatest possible extent. Then because it should permeate, fulfil and characterise our entire life, actions and behaviour. Finally, as the deepest reason, because we have the child of Bethlehem as our role model, we want to look at everything with his eyes, measure everything by his yardstick and organise our whole life according to his thoughts and actions. This spirit of the "marvellous simplicity and plainness" of the child of Bethlehem should manifest itself in our attitude towards God.

I. - Our Saviour lies in the manger. From the first moment of his existence he had the vision of God. Before this human child lay clearly the will of God for the redemption of mankind, lay the many paths to this goal. The Saviour could have come in the strength of manhood and immediately begun his public life. But he humbled himself to the utmost; he came as a child, weak and powerless. In this way, this human child recognised the omnipotence and majesty of his Father, expressed the

recognition of his creatureliness in the helplessness of his weak life, accomplished the highest honour and glorification of the Father in his freely willed deepest humiliation. And this supreme praise of God is so plain, so simple, without any posturing or showmanship. The Father himself must send his angels and his star to proclaim it; the Redeemer has come so quietly, inconspicuously and concealed, stripped of all majesty, all splendour and all power. This is the truthfulness that expresses the enormous gulf between God and the creature; one could almost say that it clearly expresses the experience of creatureliness in poverty and helplessness, in the unlimited need for help.

For the Father and his will are everything to the child of Bethlehem. "Behold, I have come to fulfil your will" is the morning prayer of his life. Is it any wonder that the Saviour only knew one thing in his later life: the will of the Father. He has only one task, to achieve that people recognise the Father and fulfil his will. He only judges whether someone does the will of the Father, then he is his father and mother and brother and sister, or whether he wants to keep them from this will, then he says: "Back off, you devil". He sees this will of the Father in everything, in nature and in the providences of life; "behold the lilies, the birds, the Father preserves them". "Shall I not drink the cup that the Father gives me?" This is where all his endeavours go, this is what he has come for, this is his food, this is his ultimate consolation: "It is finished". In this is his certainty: "If all forsake me, the

Father is with me". Hence his admonition: "Fear not those who can kill the body". This is the basic attitude that the child of Bethlehem expresses through his voluntary, extreme need for help and defencelessness, and which the Lord impresses on us throughout his life in word and deed: there is only one greatness, that is God, and only one value, to serve him.

We should grasp this basic attitude of the child of Bethlehem ever more deeply, strive for it ever more firmly and characterise it ever more clearly in our lives. That our lives are also characterised by the name : God, our Father. This gives us the fight against pride, and also the realisation of our creatureliness, and thus of our powerlessness and weakness, of our unlimited dependence and unavoidable duty of service. Once we have come to terms with the words of the divine child: "Behold, I have come to fulfil your will", then the idea of the Father can become the star of our lives. A star from which light shines on all paths and destinies; for everything comes from the Father and should lead me to the Father. We will judge and evaluate ourselves and our environment from the tower of eternity. From God's point of view, who sees the world from a unified perspective and context. In this way, our whole attitude to life becomes uniform and secure, our path calm and peaceful despite the night and trials. It is like a foreboding, a distant vision of God's plans in the government of the world and in our lives, like a delightful savouring of God's guidance, like a sweet experience of the Father's love that sustains us.

The more we are imbued with the fact of our creatureliness and duty of service, the deeper we live into the Father's thought, the more truthful our life becomes, the simpler and easier it is. For what do we care about the judgement of those around us? What about their friendly or hostile attitude? What about prestige and success? All this can only beguile us and distract us from the only thing that is necessary, the Father.

Admittedly, the path to this goal is long and difficult. Until we are convinced that the simplicity of the child of Bethlehem is greater, more honest and more beautiful than earthly splendour, posturing and the desire for recognition. Until we no longer seek prestige, influence and power. Until we want to share the hiddenness, the being unrecognised and unrecognised with the child of Bethlehem. Until our wishes and longings do not keep flying off to foreign destinations, until they all come to rest with the child and his wish: that the Father may be recognised and loved, and first of all by myself. It is a long way until the thought of God and his providence encompasses all our daily work and suffering, until prayer and work no longer interfere with each other but resound in harmony. Until we hear God's voice in nature and its workings and hear the quiet call of our Father even in the blows of fate, in failure and illness. Then everything earthly, all the culture of this world, all the joy of this world will gradually take on a certain strangeness and coolness, will become stale and empty, will only be a mirror and a parable. And deeper and deeper calm returns to the soul, ever more delicious peace, which is not driven away by the waves of the surface. But it is precisely in this maturing process that the soul will often

painfully wrestle for God and his closeness, just as Jacob once wrestled with the angel one long, dark night. But the more childlike the soul turns to the Father, the simpler and truer, the quicker the struggle will end with the dawn.

A long way and a difficult one. But by following the Father, we will always find strength and courage. Just as the child of Bethlehem turned to the Father and sacrificed himself, just as he discussed everything with the Father throughout his life. In the same way, we must place ourselves in prayer, like children discuss everything with the Father, learn to know his will better and fulfil it more faithfully. The purpose of prayer is to cultivate and deepen our relationship as children and to shape our lives from this attitude. It has the purpose of showing us what hinders us from the Father and giving us the strength to solve and overcome it; it has the purpose of showing us new and higher ways and giving us the grace to please the Father more and show him greater love.

Thus the child of Bethlehem in his attitude towards the Father is a marvellous example for us in his delightful simplicity and unpretentiousness, and a pledge that all the virtues that make us dear to God our Father sprout from a pure childlike spirit.

II - The spirit of the child of Bethlehem should then manifest itself in our attitude towards our family, the society of Bethlehem.

The second person in God wanted to be born into a family, a poor Jewish family. He really wanted to be a member of this family and belong to it the greater part

of his life. It was the great, infinite God who took on human form. The Lord over all creation, the Lord over life and death. Who, with a word of his omnipotence, could change or create all conditions at his will. For whom no homage was too great, no dwelling place worthy enough, no demand too great. And now God came as a child; came into his own, and his own did not receive him; came into the world in a poor stable in a foreign land. He did not change anything in the circumstances around him. He found his way into everything, no, that is not enough, he wanted and accepted everything freely. Where is there a demand for recognition, for homage? And where it is given to him by shepherds and wise men, he accepts everything in the same simple manner of a child. For we must never forget that our Saviour already knew and saw his external situation, his task, his life and death as a child. How much was adverse and hostile to him! But can we imagine that this child would have made demands for himself in these relationships? How simply, unpretentiously and naturally the Saviour inserted himself into all relationships, into the will of his Father. This is the child who accepts the circumstances as they are; who does not bend them or try to escape them. The one who accepts the foreign and the homeland, who finds his way with good and bad days.

And what the Lord practised in the days of his childhood, he did in the years of his manhood in the spirit of a child. "The birds have their nests..., the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head".

He knew that the sons of kings do not have to pay taxes, but he wanted to fulfil all righteousness. He met his opponents and enemies, the people and the apostles, all with his simple naturalness, his simplicity and truthfulness. He was the master of the law and submitted to it. He did not come to abolish the law, but to fulfil it in a much higher way. His poverty, his concealment and his demeanour were not a theatrical display, not an attempt at effect and success; everything was pure truthfulness and simplicity.

What a marvellous example the Lord gives us! For we too form a family in our society, we are members of this family and should cultivate the sense of family, that which binds the family more firmly together, as much as possible. We have sworn ourselves to this family, freely and without compulsion; therefore we also belong to this family, must be at home in it, and must have the inner urge not to want to flee from it, to avoid its direction, but to want to go "home" as far as possible, or, if that is not possible, to be closely connected in spirit to it, its nature and tradition.

Of course, only children and those who have retained or regained a sense of childhood have a centre, a source of strength and security in the family. Those who do not have a child's sense of purpose wander away, become unstable and often unrooted. It is a mistake to think that you cannot develop in the confines of the family. The family should be a means of awakening and developing talents, of strengthening them so that they can then stand their ground in the battle of life. But what is needed

is the simplicity, unpretentiousness and honesty of the child, who willingly adapts to circumstances, who not only outwardly but inwardly freely accepts other ways and habits and accepts them, indeed learns to understand and respect them. When men then put aside their own wishes and opinions in the interest of the family, when one becomes a brother to the other in esteem, in helping and bearing with each other, in giving and comforting, oh, what a simplicity of mind, a nobility of spirit, a childlikeness full of masculine strength and vigour! How the Christ Child will rejoice over such a family!

Certainly, it is not easy, indeed it is often very difficult. But it is difficult because our views and aspirations are outward-looking, centrifugal. It is so natural that in new, revolutionary times and their new demands, the sense of family and its tradition can fade. People believe they are helping the times and the people by breaking with tradition and boldly daring to innovate. And yet, in these cases, goodwill is probably greater than experience and a sense of tradition. How deeply the Church has grasped the spirit of the Child of Bethlehem when it is the faithful guardian of tradition and remains strong in its constant connection with the past in order to adapt to new times and new demands. She watches over the revelation, and it is precisely this reverence and love that penetrates ever deeper and grasps with certainty what the inheritance has to offer the new age. Just as there are no new natural forces in the natural world, but only new ways of discovering and utilising them, so it is similar in

the realm of the spirit, where a new truth is so rarely discovered, but where inheritance is almost always expressed in a new language and form and adapted to new times. Everything shows us the importance of reverence, modesty and moderation. Revolutionary intellectual innovations may have brought about a break with the past, but they have also created countless difficulties for the future. It is similar when good will goes to work without experience and reverence. Those who detach themselves from the solid ground of experience attempt to build where there is no foundation and no organic connection. You will soon feel this, become insecure and perhaps experience a breakdown. Anyone who separates branches from the vine that are too young and still tender will never grow strong, fruitful vines from them. Basically, a lack of childishness and its simple simplicity is a lack of integration into the family and into the will of God. For every renewal begins with itself in honesty and truthfulness and, if it corresponds to God's will, will unfailingly work like a leaven, like a light, like the child of Bethlehem. Just as this child appeared at the greatest turning point of time, so in his coming he is also a model for us in his simplicity, unpretentiousness, reverence for what has been handed down and love for the family.

The child of Bethlehem is the Lord and ruler of heaven and earth. He came into the family to be submissive. "He became obedient unto death, even death on a cross". Let us never forget that this child was able to determine all the circumstances of his life himself; he organised

everything according to his Father's will. The first word that the Holy Scriptures pass on from him - it has already been quoted - is the motto of his life: "Behold, I have come to fulfil your will". The first word that the Gospels record of him is his confession of submission to his Father: "Did you not know that I must be in what is my Father's?" On the Mount of Olives he wrestled in agony and yet he said: "Not my will be done, but yours". And his last word is surrender to the will of the Father: "It is finished! Father, into your hands I commend my spirit". His birthplace, his exile in Egypt, his concealment in Nazareth, his workshop and his profession, his public ministry, everything is under the will of the Father, under the limits of the land and the people, under the restrictions of circumstances and people, as the Father has ordained, but also under the blessing of obedience. And this obedience was never grudgingly endured by the child in the manger, by the young man in Nazareth, by the teacher and shepherd of the people, but was loved and embraced as an expression of filial love and devotion to his Father. With this unreserved obedience, he brought honour and joy to the Father and redeemed the world. It is the obedience of the child who wants nothing more than to conform to the will of the Father, who fulfils this obedience naturally, as a matter of course, without reservation, without hesitation or wavering, with all the love of his heart and joyful devotion. In this, too, the child is our role model and strength. For the family guidance

and obedience. And it is strange that it is not the child himself, the eternal wisdom, who indicates the way and direction, nor the wisest virgin, but the good St Joseph. We can well assume that St Joseph consulted with the Virgin Mary on important matters; the Scriptures do not mention this. But he certainly did not consult with the divine child, and it is equally certain that he did not consult where God's will seemed clear to him: "He took the child and his mother and went to Egypt". And so it was with the return, so with the choice of Nazareth, and so probably countless times. That is why it is natural that we strive for the spirit of the child of Bethlehem, from within, from a deep, noble childlike spirit, from firm faith in God's providence, to submit and bow under the yoke of obedience. A child wants to obey, awaits instruction. We want to love and practise obedience with this attitude. It is not necessary to first talk about the necessity, the sublimity, the blessing of obedience. Just one thing: it is the way that the child of Bethlehem walked, the spirit that he exemplifies for us. Let us often see how willingly the child submits to everything, how calmly he accepts everything. Can we imagine that this child ever inwardly resisted an instruction, tried to circumvent or reinterpret it, that resentment or bitterness ever arose in his soul against his mother or St Joseph, or even against his heavenly Father, who led him down the path of deprivation, outcasting and collapse? Such a thing is unthinkable. Only a joyful: "Yes, Father" is to be expected. That was

his love, to obey the Father, that was the whole childlike, open, unreserved devotion.

Let us also say a childlike, joyful "Yes, Father!" in all situations in our lives. Let us show obedience in action, and even more, let us obey inwardly with our judgement and our will. Let us fulfil this obedience in the spirit of faith by seeing the holy will of God in the instructions of each of our superiors. For so it is indeed. Where we obey, we have the certainty that we are doing the will of God. In our obedience, it is not the expediency and goodness of the command that is in question, nor the correctness of what is commanded, nor the experience and wisdom of the person giving the command, but only that the execution of the command, the obedience, is the will of God for us. Our superiors are not infallible, but our obedience is infallible, because the fulfilment of the command of our superiors is the fulfilment of God's will. Certainly one may make representations to one's superiors; indeed, there may be a duty to do so. But if the superior insists on his instructions within his jurisdiction, we must obey and thereby fulfil God's will.

In this view lies the protection against the judgement and condemnation of our superiors, against the stirring up of opinion among ourselves; here lies the guarantee for the calm and peace of our own hearts, the guarantee for the strength and resilience of our society both internally and externally, the guarantee for serious imitation of the child of Bethlehem. What does it mean whether we go this way or that, say, perhaps following a more or less wise human command, compared to the certain fact that in obedience

we are in any case fulfilling God's holy will and practising the spirit of the child of Bethlehem?

What has been said here about obedience in general applies in a special way to submission to the head of the Society, the Superior General. This is not about the person, but about the office and the bearer of the office. In the Superior General, the Society has its centre of unity and power; according to our Constitutions, he appoints all the other superiors of the Society; he is the mediator of God's will for each and every individual in the area of his competence, as described in the Constitutions. It must therefore be the wish and will of every member of our Society to seek and maintain contact with the Superior General and to follow his instructions willingly, punctually and completely. Not out of earthly prudence, still less out of any form of obeisance, but for the sake of God, whose authority gives us the certainty that this obedience will infallibly lead to God's honour and the salvation of our souls. This is also the spirit of the child of Bethlehem, who fulfilled every command, even the most incomprehensible, with childlike love and faithfulness as the adorable will of his beloved Father.

Through nothing are we so much and so quickly assimilated to the divine child as through love and faithful obedience. For in this way the divine Teacher will send and give to each one precisely what is useful and necessary for his development, so that we may all grow to the fullness of the manhood of Christ. In this way we

are practically introduced to the thoughts, the lifestyle and the tradition of Christ. In this way, we gradually acquire the inner strength and security to actually make decisions in the spirit of the child of Bethlehem at an independent position. Only on this path of obedience do we grow closer to Christ and his way, are we protected against the dangers of the environment and the dangers that come from within ourselves, against unbridled urges for freedom, striving for disorganised independence, rash rejection of everything that has gone before and does not suit us. Thus obedience truly becomes the blossom of childlike faith in God's guidance through weak people, the blossom of childlike trust in God's wisdom and faithfulness, the blossom of childlike love that gives itself to the Father. In obedience there is not only high maturity and deep wisdom, there is also the highest honouring of God and a profound understanding of the spirit of our child of Bethlehem.

To this obedience must be added love, which is the bond of the family. Just as the family of Bethlehem teaches us. A love for one another full of consideration and respect, full of benevolence and masculine strength. A love that not only keeps out all worldly, levelling influences, but even more so all dangerous and divisive influences from outside, but instead cultivates everything that keeps unity, that promotes the family spirit and homeliness. A love that is always ready to help, without making excuses or making things important, to make sacrifices of time and labour for others and for the community. This is what the Holy Family did. This is the spirit of the child of

Bethlehem, a simple willingness to serve, a natural willingness to bear and Caring, sacrificial willingness to help.

III - The spirit of the Child of Bethlehem must also manifest itself in our attitude to the purpose of our society, to the apostolate. The angel once told the shepherds: "Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy; today the Saviour is born to you". And yet in the manger lay a poor, helpless child. And it was another 30 years before this child began his apostolic work, and then again a longer time before he spoke the word on the cross: "It is finished", the work of redemption is complete. But it says: "Today the Saviour is born to you". Has the Lord not thus emphatically shown that the redemption of the world is achieved above all through an inner attitude, through attitude and will, through prayer and sacrifice, through faithfulness in the place entrusted to us by Providence? This is a consolation for all those who do not work on the mission field and a reminder to missionaries to keep the spirit alive above all outward activity.

The child came to us as a saviour. He wanted to free the world from the chains of sin and bondage, free it from the slavery of desires and hell, free it from eternal death. But how does a child want to defeat the superiority of earthly goods, the violence of a hostile world and thus redeem humanity?

That is the miracle! In its poverty and utmost pleasure it has overcome its poverty. its wealth, its defencelessness, its possession, and all the weapons of the world break, all violence shatters.

With his love and compassion he conquers all. This is the depth of God's wisdom, that in the powerlessness of the child all power is overcome, in the simplicity of the child all earthly wisdom is put to shame, and so in the child of Bethlehem and his childlike spirit lies the path to redemption.

His poverty has made us rich. As long as interest is focussed on earthly things, there is always danger. For these interests are difficult to keep in order and harmony, since they arouse selfishness and often stem from it, since they fear competitors and easily disturb the peace. Where inclination and desire turn to created things, there is the danger of attachment, the danger of wanting to possess and use them. This jeopardises inner peace and freedom where people are worried about possessions and pleasure. Whether it is money and possessions, or sensual pleasures, or honour and power, or the goods of a sham culture. That is why the child of Bethlehem chose poverty, the utmost poverty, which brings and secures peace with himself and with others. In the same spirit, the Saviour later rejected the temptation to be full, to enjoy life, when the tempter said: "Say the word and the stones will become bread". And in the same way, he overcame the lust for glory - "Throw yourself down" - and the lust for power, the lust for self: "I will give you all these things if you worship me". Only in poverty, in detachment, is there security and freedom. And even if we do not have a vow of poverty, we must cultivate the spirit that the child teaches us, which makes us inwardly free and all the more securely committed to God and his providence.

The example of the child also teaches us not to rely on earthly aids in our work, but to cultivate the spirit. Of course we need these earthly means. But "seek ye first the kingdom of God, and the rest shall be added unto you".

The child also teaches us the separation from parents, home and love. How attached the child was to his mother. She was his sweet home, his wealth, the work of art of his redemptive activity. And yet the hour came when he parted from his mother and from his cosy home in Nazareth. When he no longer called her mother. It was the time of his public life when Mary was to grow from mother to helper in the great work of redemption. When she had to take the place of the woman who crushed the serpent's head. Then the Lord called her in Cana: "Woman, what do you care! My hour has not yet come". And once again on the cross the Lord says: Woman, behold your son! Son, behold your mother!" This is the release from even the highest goods, the call to complete freedom and total dedication to the apostolate.

Such a height of detachment is not possible without serious training and great demands. But the child shows us the hardship of poverty, the bitterness of foreignness, the renunciation of high and intellectual activity in favour of hidden work on crafts. The child truly went through a difficult school, wanted it voluntarily, although it was not necessary for him. A difficult word school. One remembers many a word of the Lord: "I did not come to bring peace, but a sword". "I came to cast fire on the

earth, and what do I want but for it to burn". "He who puts his hand to the plough and looks back is not worthy of me". "Whoever loves father and mother more than me is not worthy of me". "Whoever wants to follow me, take up his cross daily". When you remember these words, you realise that even the initial preparation for the apostolic school and then the apostolate itself make great demands.

Even the preparation must take place in the spirit of the child of Bethlehem. The constitutions say of the pupils: "They should learn to be content with little". This means renunciation and sacrifice. How far this spirit of Christ is from the spirit of the world, which allows us to grow up in softness and meekness, which rejects sacrifice and attachment. In this way, the less good dispositions grow, become overpowering and insurmountable, while the good sides are crippled. In contrast, young people must be brought up to be faithful to their duty and willing to make sacrifices.

In the years of growing independence, the individual must increasingly take care of their own education and maturation. The environment can only admonish and give suggestions. And yet inner consolidation is absolutely necessary in the face of old and new paganism. Yes, if only paganism were to confront us in a deterrent form! But it often comes in a seductive form, in pleasant-sounding speeches and principles, like the air and food in us. If there is no real inner firmness, moral maturity and strength, the danger is great. But this firmness, this maturity is only achieved through clear principles,

through tireless, relentless work and demands on oneself. As the Saviour says: "I do not pray for this world", that is the gap between God and this world. And another word: "If your hand offends you, cut it off", that is the relentlessness and hardness against oneself. A long and tough training is necessary, a long way until the steel is hardened in the fire and on the anvil. It is only in later years that those with understanding come to realise the meaning of education. And it is often too late to realise how in some situations and trials one would have had the best means for apostolic self-education. Let us always bear in mind the spirit of the child of Bethlehem, "who is not of this world", who detached himself from everything that is not of God and embraced everything that brought him closer to the Father; with him there is no softness and no whining, no self-satisfied brooding and wallowing in suffering or world-weariness; with him there is manly strength and vigour. Thus, in his poverty, in his extreme solution, the child kept himself free and showed the world the way to redemption.

We can also learn from the Child of Bethlehem which groups he was primarily addressing in his work of redemption. It is the needy, the oppressed, the children, the people with a sense of sin, the sick. These are the people who are open to God's grace, who have been ploughed through suffering and hardship and who offer the seed open ground. They are not those who find the bread of heaven stale and unappealing due to a refined culture. Not the self-assured who can no longer and no longer want to bend. It is the same circles that are still

most accessible to salvation today. In his later life, too, the Lord primarily addressed these circles: "Father, I thank you that you have revealed this to the little ones, but hidden it from the wise", and where it was the so-called better, the educated circles, they first had to absorb this spirit of the child.

In this preference for the little ones before men, in contrast to those who think themselves wise and great, the simplicity of character, the incorruptibility in the face of all pretence and posturing, the greatness and wisdom that looks away from outward appearances and appreciates only the inner value is revealed. In this way, however, the child of Bethlehem shows us the way to apostolic educational work. In adapting to the little ones. In valuing and serving those who count for nothing in the eyes of the world. In educating the respected in this spirit of childhood. For "God has chosen the lowly to shame the great".

And the way in which the child redeemed? Did the Saviour want to teach us patience, patience and patience again during the long years of hiding and waiting for public activity? That is often so immeasurably difficult in missionary life. The gardener knows that spring brings the buds and summer the roses. But the missionary? And what about the one working back home? How often is there no visible success? He has left everything, put in everything, fished long nights and caught nothing. The child of Bethlehem may be the consolation here, for he waited much longer, prayed, sacrificed and then finally received so little fruit before his death.

In the mission as well as at home, many confreres have their subordinates and are often forced to act with authority and demand respect and obedience for their office and person. But this obliges us all the more to cultivate the spirit of the Child of Bethlehem in his simplicity and modesty: "You call me Lord and Master, and you are right to do so, for I am he. If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet, you also must wash one another's feet. "Whoever is the greatest among you, become like the least, and whoever is the leader, become like the servant". "I have set you an example, that you should do as I have done". And he represented authority and practised service. Above all, a superior must never bear grudges, be unforgiving, despair of poor people, but hope and help; with all determination in certain demands, he must exercise patience and mercy, and only when nothing helps and the offence is not remedied, apply the word of Christ: "Knock him down!"

However, the various superiors and the missionaries at their posts will not only guard and promote the family spirit but will themselves always strive for unity with their highest ecclesiastical and social superiors. That they work together in the same spirit, with the same methods, and support and stand up for one another. For this unity, which grows out of the child spirit, gives the community strength, inner peace, security and confidence, and is the pledge of good, prosperous leadership of the subordinates in their work for the salvation of souls.

And we have something else to learn from the child of Bethlehem for our attitude to the apostolate. That is courage and trust, unlimited courage, unlimited trust for us personally and for our work.

There lies the child in the manger, so calm and peaceful. And yet he knows that the most difficult battles will break out because of him, that families will be torn apart because of him. He knows that princes and nations will rise up to fight against his teaching and against the Saviour himself, that dungeons and blood and death await him. The child knows this, and despite his complete defencelessness, his peace and tranquillity are unclouded. For he knows that the Father and his love and power are watching over him. And so this childlike peace and security remained throughout his entire life. Again and again he warns: "Do not be afraid!" "Trust!" "And if you are dragged before kings and judges, do not be afraid!" It reminds us of the words of the old scripture: "And if you walk in darkness and no star gives you light, then trust in the Lord and lean on him". All courage, all confidence, all endurance, all courage to die grows from this trust, from this defenceless security. "If all forsake me, the Father will remain with me". Therein lies the reason, the rock-solid foundation of trust. Thus the child is the most fearless, the bravest, the strongest.

And that also applies to us. That we do not build our security on sand, our trust not on earthly powers or on people. Only those who rely entirely on God and nothing else can be courageous and calm in the face of death.

Any other ground is shaky and leads to insecurity, pusillanimity and inferiority. Trusting in God gives inner security. And only a childlike mind can trust God fully and without restraint. Everyone else has reservations, makes their own safeguards. Only children are completely "unprotected", inwardly completely free and solely focussed on the Father. This is the unlimited, unreserved trust of a child's soul.

And we should achieve this for our souls and for our work. Whether our work serves the apostolate remotely or directly, it doesn't matter. In any case, we are at the service of the Child of Bethlehem and his apostolate. In this fact we have the reason for our trust; if we dedicate ourselves completely to his service, if we make an honest effort, it is infallible that God's providence is watching over us. His special providence, because we have given ourselves to him and because we are working on his work, on the redemption of the world. How much strength and courage and confidence will flow to us from this thought that in a certain sense the childhood and growth of our Lord is entrusted to us. That our labour, our sacrifices, our loneliness, even our weakness and our failure, everything, everything is decided in his special love and providence. That not a hair falls from our head without his will. That we are the apple of his eye and that no one can count on his providence more than those who have consecrated themselves to him and his redemptive service.

Of course, only a child's mind possesses the full power of this trust. Anyone who hesitates and only half dares, who makes reservations and builds their own paths, will never

inwardly calm and secure. "And if I walk in the shadow of death, I will not tremble". How this must be a joy, a pride, an incentive to ever greater trust and ever more unreserved devotion. How it must be a sweet endeavour for us to penetrate ever deeper into the spirit of the child of Bethlehem and his devotion to the Father, to educate ourselves more and more and to grow in this spirit of the divine child.

IV - Far and high is the goal to which God calls us. How will we reach it? Only in the power of love that the divine child teaches us, only by imitating his infinite love for the Father and for the souls entrusted to him.

An infinite love filled the child from the very first moment of its existence. The child was not placed in time and people and circumstances as we are, but the child wanted all of this himself because the Father wanted it. An infinite love for the Father that encompassed the entire life of the Saviour. From the first prayer of sacrifice to the last word on the cross. At the end of the Last Supper, the Lord said: "That the world may know that I love my Father, arise and let us go", and then he went into his suffering and death. But this word can be written about the first hour and the whole life of the child: "That the world may know that I love my Father". It is a love of action, full of masculine strength and sacrifice. "What pleases the Father, what is his will, I always do," the Lord could say of himself. "Thy will be done" is the leitmotif of this life, to which all endeavours and desires are directed.

"Your will, not mine". That is why the child came to earth, the Father's great gift for our redemption. And that is why "the Father loves him, because the Saviour lays down his life" for us. An infinite love, for "greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends".

And yet this love for us did not come easily to the child. For "men did not receive Him", the blissful child. The Lord "knew the people" and "knew what was in them", "that he could not entrust himself to them". The best of them, the apostles, understood him so little and ultimately abandoned him in his greatest need. The people who were hostile to him, hated him, killed him. Yes, he suffered so much among men that the sigh escaped him: "How much longer must I endure this generation!" And yet he loved them because the Father loved them. And he loved them so much that he laid down his life. So much so that he became her teacher, her kind Samaritan, her merciful Saviour. That he did not extinguish the smouldering wick, did not break the bent reed, and welcomed the prodigal son with open arms of fatherly love.

And this love is the child's complete, undivided devotion, its unreserved way of giving itself. So without any marvelling and without any question as to whether the sacrifice is worthwhile and worthwhile. Whether it was worth the effort and the commitment. It is love to the limit and beyond all measure. A little prayer, a drop of blood would have been enough to redeem people, and now this excess! And the child's life is still too short for

any sacrifice. The child wants to sacrifice himself on the altar until the end of time, and it is his holy will to give himself that fulfils all these sacrifices with infinite value. Until the end of time, the Redeemer wants to dwell among us teaching, forgiving, helping, wants to be our food in the Holy Eucharist, wants to wander and wait through the centuries, wants to remain the centre of the Church and its protection. And even if all of this only takes effect in the course of the centuries, the child has foresaw, willed and carried everything ahead. Truly, this infinite love for the Father and for souls is incomprehensible.

And this infinite love is the centre of every thought, every decision, every deed. It is the driving and sanctifying force. This love considers all plans, scrutinises and chooses the paths. This love is the explanation for all actions, is the source and strength for this whole life. This love is the ultimate reason for his attitude towards the Father, towards us humans and towards his mission. That is why the angels can sing: "Glory to God in the highest, peace to men". God has never been more honoured than through the love of this child, and it is only in this love that our redemption and our peace are decided.

This is the great, unattainable example of the child of Bethlehem, who shows us that love for God and souls must also be the driving, vitalising and sanctifying force in our lives. Only if we are ignited by a spark of this love will we understand the spirit of our society and be captured by it. Only in this love will we truly live the constitutions, grasp them in spirit and fulfil them.

Without this love, the constitutions remain a closed book, a set of rules that only hinder and burden us. Without this love there is a dichotomy in our lives, the dichotomy of a double spirit, the one that we have and yet should not have, the other that speaks to us demanding from the constitutions, but which is not our own. And from this conflict comes the discord, the unhappiness within us and for our life and work, the threat to the unity and peace of society. Without this love, we will never personally commit ourselves sincerely and completely to our ideal, to our constitutions, to our family, to our superiors and to our field of work; we will judge, criticise, poison and always want to change. And why all this? Because we do not have love, because we do not love what is before us as a demand.

That is why we pray often and fervently for this love, with which we ourselves and our society stand and fall. That the child of Bethlehem may warm and inflame us with his love, with a love that gives itself completely in the manner of a child; not cautiously, hesitantly weighing things up, but with the unreservedness of a child, reserving nothing, but giving everything with bold audacity. A love of personal action, of personal sacrifice, of personal commitment. And if we ever find this sacrificial love difficult and the path seems dark and cold and lonely to us, then we kneel before the sweet child in Bethlehem, who allowed himself to be pushed out into the dark night and the dark and cold stable out of love for us. And when we become tired and weak on our way and

our strength wants to fail, then we see the weakness and helplessness of the child, his complete powerlessness and need for help, from which all wealth, all warmth and all strength flowed. And when we are shaken by the narrowness of our lives, by the limitations of our work, by the failure of so much good will, then we ask the child of Bethlehem where his effectiveness is, where the measure is for his hidden years, for so much fruitless work. We will always find comfort and strength in the child of Bethlehem, understanding and guidance. If we have love and persevere in love. For then our life and work may be darkened by night, but the eternal stars will still shine, and the angels will sing over such a life, and the Father will rejoice in the faithful imitation of the child. Surely such a life, in which love animates and permeates our attitude to God, to the family, to immortal souls, is a wonderful honour to God, a rich, blessed work, full of deep peace and quiet happiness. Therefore, *aemulamini caritatem*, be zealous for this love.

May God grant that we may all strive towards this goal with earnest endeavour, and may God grant abundant grace to our faithful cooperation, so that many of us may come very close to the ideal of the Child of Bethlehem.

In the love of the divine child

P. BONDOLFI,
Sup. Gen.

Immensee, Christmas 1939.