

NOTEBOOKS

Fr. Stanislaus Falleur, SCJ

Conferences and Sermons of Fr. Dehon to the Novices
November 9, 1879—October 21, 1881
with appendices



As one of the first novices with the Oblates of the Heart of Jesus, Fr. Stanislaus Falleur took notes on the conferences given at the novitiate between 1879 and 1881. His preserved notebooks, referred to as Cahiers Falleur, have recently been translated into English and are available online. This introduction, by David Schimmel, offers a brief synopsis of what these notebooks contain and what they reveal about the Founder.

It is not surprising that the first novitiate for the newly formed Oblates of the Heart of Jesus was a bit unusual. Fr. John of the Heart of Jesus, known throughout the city of San Quentin as Abbé Dehon, was the Novice Master, but he did not live in the Novitiate community. Rather, he commuted from his residence at St. John Institute to give no less than three conferences a week, ordinarily on Sunday, Wednesday, and Friday. Over the three years in which Fr. John of the Heart of Jesus served as Novice Master, there were first three, then twelve, then sixteen novices ranging in age from 18-50.

Most of the novices were priests, and some taught morning classes at St. John Institute. This might explain why the daily schedule did not include manual labor, which would have been customary. Defending himself against the novices' complaints about his lack of presence, Fr. John insisted that the Heart of Jesus was the real Novice Master. For most novices, the novitiate lasted for two years in order to facilitate acquired habits of virtue. "Otherwise," Fr. John observed, "it would take only an hour if vesting [*with the habit*] were enough to be holy."

Founding the Oblates of the Heart of Jesus in his mid-thirties, Fr. John came to his role as Novice Master with the experience of his diocesan seminary formation and of his spiritual practice that included participation in a diocesan priests' support group. His lack of personal experience in forming religious no doubt encouraged him to rely heavily upon the written work

of spiritual masters and on the contemporary practice in other novitiates, which reflected a monastic lifestyle more than an apostolic one.

Perhaps wishing for more surety than was humanly available, Fr. John also allowed the “miraculous inspirations” of Sr. Mary of Saint Ignatius to guide him. Years later, he regretted that his grasp of spiritual theology was deficient at this fundamental moment in the Congregation.

In his role as Novice Master, it is sometimes difficult to discern whether Fr. John’s exhortations to the novices came from his personal conviction or from what he was “supposed to say.” Given the reality that he might have been working out for himself the spiritual practices most beneficial to the Oblates of the Heart of Jesus, he is a stickler for silence at all times, except during recreation. He often imposes fasting on bread and water—sometimes done on one’s knees—to pray for vocations, to prepare for the honor of exposition of the Blessed Sacrament, or because, “Our Lord has been quite offended these past few days at the Novitiate.”

At times, Fr. John of the Heart of Jesus sounds not only severe, but scolding when he accuses the novices of ill-will, laxity, disobedience, a lack of preparation, and a loss of graces. Bringing himself into the picture, he notes, “Regarding ourselves, miserable as we are, we only have a right to humiliation, annihilation, contempt, and hatred.” It remains a question whether or not this negative motivational approach was ever successful, but it certainly falls flat in our day.

Nonetheless, Fr. John of the Heart of Jesus matched his severity with compassion. “Because we often fall again, should we be discouraged?” He answers his own rhetorical question. “Not at all, if we know how to get up immediately and show a fidelity, if not constant, at least constantly being renewed. The fall is quickly forgotten by our Lord, when we always get up courageously.”

Interestingly, he begins his course of lectures with the Beatitudes, which he considers “an overview of religious life.” While the Beatitudes carry a general meaning for the faithful, they carry a special meaning for religious life, and in addition, a special meaning for the Oblates of the Heart of Jesus. Fr. John will duplicate this approach in the study of religious life, explaining, “We will always see what is special for us.” Characteristically, he interprets everything through the lens of the Heart of Jesus’ total offering of self. Thus, he can claim that the Magi, “were really Oblates,” commenting that they left everything to offer themselves with their gifts.

In the treatment of the vows, it is noteworthy that chastity is covered in a portion of one conference, while poverty takes up ten conferences, and obedience consumes eighteen conferences. Clearly, for Fr. John of the Heart of Jesus, the vow of obedience is the usual form of the fourth vow of immolation, for which there are seven dedicated conferences. Although

the fourth vow, so dear to Fr. John, will not stand the test of time, his attempts to articulate its value produced some solid expressions of the centrality of a spirituality of oblation.

Imbued as he is in the lessons of scripture, Fr. John of the Heart of Jesus quotes St. Paul's Letter to the Ephesians. *Be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.* "With these words," Fr. John explains, "St. Paul shows us that the sublime vocation through which a victim is offered to God is the very imitation of Jesus, and that it is by love that this immolation is consumed. He proposes to all Christians, particularly to all priests and particularly to consecrated souls, to imitate Jesus in this manner."

Because "immolation was the dominant character of the life of our Lord," Fr. John reasons, "our life is immolation and it will always end with self-immolation—the gentle self-immolation of every day—as opposed to the violent self-immolation of shedding one's blood. Let us offer everything to Jesus and take the motto, 'Whatever Jesus wants.' It is half of our vocation: the immolation of the will; the other is the gift of the heart, of love." To reiterate, he tells the novices, "The good pleasure of God: that is where our whole vocation lies. Let us aim only at this, that is, to remain Oblates."

This imitation of and union with Jesus, is an eminently practical spirituality. "For us, who always have as center, as sun, as compass, the Heart of Jesus, to what perfection shall we aim?" Fr. John of the Heart of Jesus continues with the answer: "To the brilliant and most manifested virtues of this Heart: gentleness and humility. But it is not enough to perfect oneself; how must this perfection serve our neighbor? It's by fully filling oneself with the love of the Sacred Heart that we can spread it around us."

Relying again on scripture, he quotes from the First Letter of St. John. *We know the love of God by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.* "Let us take him as a model and may his charity be a mirror for ours: his charity for God, who leads him to the foot of the cross and supports him in his martyrdom; his charity for neighbor, which makes him use his long life for his brothers in return for the love God has shown him."

Perhaps the most peculiar aspect of the novitiate under Fr. John of the Heart of Jesus, was how he consistently prepared the novices to undergo a severe test of their commitment to live a life of immolation. Basing his conviction upon the "lights in prayer" of Sr. Mary of Saint Ignatius, who predicted that the Oblates would experience a *consummatum est*, he understood that the Oblates, reliving the death and resurrection of Christ, would be suppressed but then rise. Subsequently, because "there must be a Pentecost for all works as for souls," Fr. John believed the Oblates would be strengthened and prosper as a work of the Heart of Jesus.

In one of his conferences to the novices, Fr. John says, "Today is a day of retreat dedicated to union with the agony of our Lord. This is the appropriate day to talk about the preparation we are going to have to make. The test approaches. We are sure that Satan has reserved the best blows for us. It is therefore time to unite ourselves to the agony of Jesus. What does the test have in store for us? God knows. Certainly calumnies, contempt, perhaps some external suffering.

"Let's prepare if we do not want to weaken during the test. Our Work is in Gethsemane before it is in Calvary. It will go through the test by the cross. Do not fear, but desire the *consummatum est*, because the confirmation will date from there, the immense graces reserved for the Work, the multiplication of its members. From the Heart of Jesus, opened by the lance, came the Church with grace and glory, so the test will bring out fruitfulness for our Work. Let us have only one preoccupation: remaining faithful to our vocation."

Of course, at the time that Fr. John of the Heart of Jesus was speaking to his novices, the anti-clerical French government issued an edict that expelled the Jesuits from the country and required Religious Congregations not yet legally recognized by the State to request approval. In reaction to general non-compliance, the government closed almost three hundred religious houses and exiled more than fifty-six hundred religious at the beginning of 1881. Naturally, Fr. John imagined suppression by the government to be the catalyst for the *consummatum est*. Steeling his novices for what would be a mighty test of their spirit of immolation, Fr. John often encourages, "Let's be generous."

It is a testament to Fr. John of the Heart of Jesus, that his personal vow of immolation could not be shaken when the Holy See, and not the French government, brought about the *consummatum est*. As painful as this test was, he had prepared himself in the manner that he had spoken to his novices. Addressing his bishop, Fr. John writes, "Your Excellency knows that I founded the Institute of the Oblates of the Sacred Heart of Jesus with the sole intention of doing God's will and procuring his glory. Our Lord is now asking me to destroy what he asked me to build. I cannot entertain, not even for an instant, the slightest thought of resistance. I can say nothing else except my *fiat*."

Yet, in the midst of seeming destruction, Fr. Dehon's spiritual sensibilities were correct because the test resulted in new life. Almost immediately, the Institute was resurrected as the Priests of the Sacred Heart, bringing a Pentecost of new members and fruitful ministry that would eventually span the globe.

As unusual as the first novitiate was, the notes recorded by Fr. Stanislaus Falleur preserve evidence that, in the opening words of the SCJ Rule of Life, "The Founder received the grace and the mission to enrich the Church with an apostolic religious Institute that lived according to his evangelical inspiration."