

WHY A RETREAT?

"MENS NOSTRA"

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Pius XI

Mens nostra: On the Promotion of
the Spiritual Exerciese. 1929.



POPE PIUS XI

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THE ENCYCLICAL OF POPE PIUS XI ON LAYMEN'S RETREATS

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The Encyclical of Pope Pius XI
on Laymen's Retreats



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FOREWORD

IN these days of Catholic Action when there is so much emphasis being placed on mass movement in the Church, it is exceedingly important that serious thought be given to the training of our lay apostolate.

His Holiness, Pius XI, was the Pope of Catholic Action. It was his will that the laity should participate in the ministry of the clergy. It was also his will that the lay apostolate should be diligently trained for their mission. The Pope's wish is clearly manifest in his Encyclical "Mens Nostra" on retreats. "We would have," he writes, "the Cohorts of Catholic Action polished and cultivated fitly by the Spiritual Exercises."

Pius XI saw in the Retreat Movement the soul of Catholic Activity, the one single force that can do most towards the sowing of the seed of Catholic lay action. He defined the movement as a great spiritual power directed against the evils of the day. Its purpose is "to offset naturalism, that is so dominant, with its weakening influence on the constancy of Christian Faith and with its chilling effects on Christian Charity."

The Retreat Movement is finding a fertile field in the United States. It will continue to fructify to ripe maturity just as soon as we are convinced of its excellence to cure the souls of nations and of men. Pope Pius has placed no limits to its powers for good. In the Retreat Movement he saw that "piety will be enkindled, the forces of religion will be nourished, the apostolic office will unfold its fruit-bearing branches, and peace will reign in society and in the hearts of all."

May this edition of Pope Pius's Encyclical on retreats speed on its way, bringing a knowledge of the power of the Spiritual Exercises to the minds of thousands of our Catholic laymen, who, up to now, may have been only vaguely aware of the necessary influence of the Retreat Movement in the field of Catholic Action.

VERY REV. JAMES GILSENAN,
Spiritual Director,
St. Columban's Retreat League,
Silver Creek, N. Y.



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ENCYCLICAL LETTER, "MENS NOSTRA," OF POPE PIUS XI ON PROMOTION OF THE PRACTICE OF SPIRITUAL EXERCISES

PIUS PP XI

Venerable Brothers, Health and Apostolic
Benediction

WHEN at the beginning of the year We announced to the whole Catholic world an extraordinary jubilee to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of Our ordination and first Mass, Our mind and purpose, Venerable Brethren, can have escaped none of you. As We solemnly declared in the Apostolic Constitution "Auspicantibus Nobis," of the 6th of January, 1929, Our intention was not limited to gathering together the great Christian family of beloved children, whom the kind heart of God has entrusted to Our heart, and to calling them to participate in Our paternal joy by helping us to render thanks to our bountiful God. What moved Us more was the hope that, once We had graciously opened the treasury of heavenly gifts which is in Our charge, the Christian people would make use of the opportunity to strengthen their faith, to increase their devotion and perfection, to bring private and public manners to the Gospel standard. Thus as a blessed fruit of the peace and pardon obtained from God We might look for private and public peace in society.

Nor was this hope in vain. For that fervent interest in religion, with which the Christian people re-

ceived the proclamation of the jubilee, did not grow cold with time. We have seen it grow greater day by day, aided by God who brought such things to pass as will make eternally memorable this truly happy year. We Ourselves were able to witness with Our own eyes great part of this wonderful increase in faith and piety. We rejoiced in the sight of a great multitude of most dear children. We had the opportunity to admit them to Our palace, and, as it were, to press them to Our heart. With all this We had abundant cause to rejoice. We earnestly, therefore, give Our thanks to the Father of mercies for having deigned in the course of this year of expiation to plant, ripen and gather such great fruits in His vineyard. Our pastoral duty Moves Us now to try to perpetuate and increase the fruits of such an auspicious beginning, so that they may redound to the happiness and well-being of individuals and of society.

Spiritual Exercises Urged

In thinking over the ways to achieve this end the thought of Our predecessor of happy memory, Leo XIII, came to Our mind. On the occasion of another jubilee, in weighty words, which We repeated in the Constitution "Auspicantibus Nobis," he exhorted all the faithful "to retire a little while and turn their thoughts from the earth to better things." We also remember Our predecessor Pius X's golden jubilee. After consistently promoting the sacerdotal standard by word and example, he delivered a most devout "Exhortation" to the Catholic clergy, full of precious

and beautiful instruction by which to raise the edifice of spiritual life to more than ordinary heights.

After the example of these Pontiffs, We wish to add something of Our own, by urging a most excellent practice, in the hope of great good to the Christian people. We mean the practice of Spiritual Exercises. We earnestly desire to see this practice spread not only among the clergy, secular and religious, but also in the ranks of the laity. And We wish to leave this to Our beloved children as the memorial of this holy year.

We do this the more naturally at this end of the year of Our sacerdotal jubilee, for nothing more pleasant could happen to Us than to recall the heavenly graces and unspeakable consolation that We have experienced often in time of retreat; the regular intervals at which We noted Our sacerdotal progress; the light and inspiration which We drew thence for knowing and performing the Divine will; lastly, the work done thereby through all Our priestly career for the good of souls, which had such great and incredible success that We esteem retreats to be a special safeguard for eternal salvation.

Lightness Is Disease of the Age

If you consider, Venerable Brethren, the times in which we live, you will see that the importance, usefulness and timeliness of retreats are brought home by manifold considerations. The worst disease which afflicts our age, the most pregnant source of evil, is its lightness and thoughtlessness, through which men lose their way. Hence arises that continual and eager dis-

traction in external things, that insatiable desire for wealth and pleasure which slowly extinguishes in the minds of men the inclination for things that are more excellent. It implicates them so deeply in outward and passing things as to prevent all thought of eternal truths, of divine laws, and even of God Himself, the beginning and end of all. God, it is true, in His infinite goodness and mercy, no matter how far the evils penetrate, does not cease to give the largess of His grace, and to draw men to Himself. Yet we must fight against this sickness of the human race. And what better help and remedy can We propose than the invitation of those weakened and careless souls to the devout quiet of the Spiritual Exercises? In these Exercises an opportunity is given to a man to get away for a few days from ordinary society and from strife and cares, and to pass the time, not in idleness, but in the consideration of those questions which are of perennial and profound interest to man, the questions of his origin and his destiny, whence he comes and whither he goes. If no more than this were attained, surely no one will deny that the Spiritual Exercises would justify their existence.

But they have still greater advantages. By the fact that they bring men's minds to deeper and more careful scrutiny of thought, word and deed, they marvelously develop the human faculties. They become a kind of spiritual gymnasium where the soul trains itself to weighing things carefully, the will is made strong, passions are restrained by thought, action and contemplation are brought into harmonious interplay,

and the soul attains its proper stature and dignity. St. Gregory brings the same thing out by an apt comparison in his book, the "Regula Pastoralis," when he says: "The human mind is like water. Contained in a vessel, it can be drawn up towards its source. Uncontained, it scatters itself below and is lost." Moreover, habituating itself to spiritual thoughts, not only does the "soul that is happy in its Lord find itself stirred in the silence and its life inexpressibly increased," as St. Eucherius of Lyons so wisely says, but it is also invited by the divine kindness to that "divine table" of which Lactantius says: "The soul knows no sweeter food than the knowledge of the truth." It obtains this knowledge as "a schooling in heavenly doctrine and a training in divine arts"—to use the words of an ancient writer formerly thought to be St. Basil. There "God is all that is learned, He is the road that is followed, He is the means of attaining the knowledge of all truth."

The Power of Retreats

From all this it is clear that retreats are remarkably adapted to the development both of the natural and of the supernatural man. In these times of ours, many obstacles are put in the way of that genuine sense and supernatural spirit of Christ which is the *raison d'être* of our religion. Far and wide we find naturalism dominant, with its weakening influence on the constancy of Christian faith and with its chilling effect on Christian charity. It is therefore most important that man should get away from that fickle

fascination which hides the good from him, and should take refuge in that blessed quiet where he may follow the divine teaching and realize that human life's true meaning lies in God's service; where he may come to hate the shamefulness of sin; where he may have a holy fear of God; where he may behold with clear sight the vanity of earthly things; where he may pay heed to the teachings and examples of Him who is "the way, the truth and the light"; where he may put off the old man and deny himself; where through humility, obedience and mortification he may put on Christ; where he may reach forward toward the "perfect man"; where he may attain to the "stature of the fullness of Christ" of which the Apostle speaks; where he may so strive with all his soul that he can use the words of the Apostle: "I live now, not I; but Christ liveth in me." Through such steps it is that the soul rises to consummate perfection. So the soul is sweetly joined to God by means of the greater fullness of divine grace obtained in those days of fervent prayer and of frequentation of the divine mysteries.

Unique and most valuable are these effects, Venerable Brethren, and far above the merely natural. In the attainment of them lies quiet, happiness and true peace. For these things the human soul is thirsty. For these things modern society looks in vain, on account of its dissipations, and its pre-occupation with fickle and perishable satisfactions. In contrast with this situation We are convinced that there is in the Spiritual Exercises a wonderful power of bringing peace to men and of winning them to holiness. Per-

haps this is brought out more clearly by the experience of other ages than our own, since in them there were innumerable souls, trained in Spiritual Exercises, by them "rooted and built up" in Christ, and who came forth from them filled with light and joy, and with that peace "which surpasseth all understanding."

Time of Great Spiritual Need

But besides that individual perfection which the Exercises are known to bring about, besides that interior peace of soul, another precious effect naturally follows which redounds to the good of society. We mean that zeal for gaining souls to Christ which is called the Apostolic spirit. For the native result of charity is this, that the justified soul in which God dwells becomes on fire to make others share in that knowledge and love of the infinite good which it possesses. Now these times of ours are times of immense spiritual need. The distant regions of the missions are "white for the harvest" and call for more numerous workmen. In our own countries the increasing spiritual needs of the peoples call for numerous bands of select and well-trained clergy, secular and religious, and for ranks of laymen willing to co-operate with the hierarchy in Catholic activities. Remembering, Venerable Brethren, the lessons of history, We proclaim that retreats are like so many Cenacles wherein courageous souls, strengthened by God's grace and following the teaching of eternal truth and the prompting of Christ's example, not only perceive the value of souls, not only conceive the desire of helping souls (in pro-

portion to each one's vocation), but also learn the ideals, the dreams and the boldness of the Christian apostolate.

Indeed our Lord often used this method for training the heralds of the Gospel. The divine Master Himself, not content with the long years of quiet in the home of Nazareth, spent forty days in the desert before He would go forth to teach the people publicly. Moreover, in the very midst of their evangelic labors He would invite the Apostles into the friendly silence of retreats—"Come aside into a desert place and rest a little." At the time of His departure from this sad earth to heaven, it was His will for those same apostles and disciples to be perfected in those ten days of retreat at Jerusalem, when they were "persevering together in prayer," so that they might be worthy to receive the Holy Spirit. What a memorable retreat that was, in which Spiritual Exercises were first foreshadowed from which the Church came forth in power and strength, and in which, with the presence and patronage of the Mother of God herself, those coadjutors were given the Apostles who may be considered the precursors of Catholic Action.

Development of Exercises

From that time on, Spiritual Exercises, if not by that name at any rate in fact, became familiar to the early Christians, as St. Francis de Sales says, and as patristic documents reveal. St. Jerome exhorted the noblewoman Celanti: "Choose a suitable and quiet place, and betake yourself to it as to a haven. Let

your zeal for divine reading be so great, your prayers so frequent, your thought of the future life so constant, as to balance the occupations of the rest of your time. We say this not to take you away from your family; but with the idea that there you will learn and meditate how to act with them." And Jerome's contemporary, Peter Chrysologus, the Bishop of Ravenna, attracted the people with the celebrated invitation: "We have given a year to the body; let us give a day to the soul. Let us live a little bit for God after living altogether for the world. Let the voice of God sound in our ears; let not familiar sounds confuse our hearing. So armed, so trained, brethren, let us declare war on sin, certain of victory."

As time went on, men continued to be drawn by the desire for solitude and the concerns of the soul with God. The more turbulent the outward vicissitudes, the more insistently did the Holy Ghost urge into solitude those who hungered and thirsted after justice. "They might more often feel free from corporeal desires and able to attend to wisdom in the chamber of God, where in the relief from outward noises they are made happy by holy meditations and celestial joys."

After the providence of God had raised up in His Church many men endowed with supernatural gifts for guidance in the spiritual life, men who had gathered wise rules and methods whether from divine revelation, or from their own experience and the tradition of centuries—after all this, His will gave to the world those works of His great servant, Ignatius Loyola,

which have the special title of "Spiritual Exercises." The Benedictine Louis Blossius, cited by St. Alphonsus Liguori in a beautiful epistle on retreats, calls the Exercises "a treasure which God has given to His Church in these latter days and for which we owe great gratitude."

Oases in Life's Desert

The fame of these Exercises quickly got abroad in the Church, as means for accelerating spiritual progress. Among many, St. Charles Borromeo, so dear to us for many reasons, used them so, and as We stated on another occasion, "he spread their use among clergy and laity." More than this, by his own industry and authority he enriched them with rules and instructions, and went so far as to found a house for special instruction in the Ignatian Exercises. He called it the Asceterium, and it was, as far as we know, the first of all such places, which afterwards became so numerous.

For as the reputation of the Exercises increased, it is wonderful how these houses were multiplied. They were like oases in the desert of this life where the faithful of both sexes might be refreshed with spiritual food. After the race had been shaken by the cruelty of war, after the spiritual and civil welfare of society had received so many wounds, after multitudes had realized the nullity of earthly hopes and had come to prefer heavenly to earthly things, unnumbered souls came to seek their peace in these retreats. Let those be an example who have come to these places whether they were drawn by the dream of higher and holier

perfection or whether they were tired of being tossed by the world's tempests, or whether disturbed by the world's anxieties or disillusioned by its deceits, or embittered by its rationalism, or smeared with its sensuality. Whatever the cause, they have come to these places for quiet, repose, and the reconstruction of their lives.

We therefore rejoice in these undertakings of piety and are grateful for them. We hold it for certain that in the growth of this work lies the most powerful support against growing evils. And We shall try, as far as in Us lies, to co-operate with the counsel of the divine Goodness, lest this secret invitation of the Holy Ghost in the minds of men lose its hoped-for richness of heavenly fruit.

Holy Father's Own Example

We do all this with the more gladness in that We are following the footsteps of Our predecessors. For a long time back this Apostolic See, which had commended the Exercises in word, lent also the authority of its example by devoting the Vatican Palace for a few days to the purposes of prayer and meditation. With no little joy and consolation We have perpetuated this custom. And in order that this joy and consolation may be available to those who surround Us (and in accordance with their universal desire), We have arranged for the Spiritual Exercises to be held every year in this palace.

It is well known also, Venerable Brethren, how much you, too, esteem the Spiritual Exercises. You

went through them as a preparation for Orders and before you received the fullness of the priesthood. Thereafter not rarely you presided over your priests when they were assembled for the same purpose. For this evidence of zeal it is fitting that We should now publicly commend you. Equally should We commend those bishops of the Eastern and Western Church who from time to time gather with their Metropolitan or Patriarch to make a retreat with him. This is a splendid example which We should like to see followed as far as circumstances permit. Nor would there be great difficulty in arranging this, if such retreats were to be held at the time of those meetings which the prelates of a province hold, when they are consulting together for the welfare of souls or for the necessities of the time. We Ourselves had decided to do this with the prelates of Lombardy during the short time that We governed the church of Milan, and doubtless We should have carried out Our purpose, had not the mystery of Divine Providence otherwise disposed of Us.

We are warranted in believing, therefore, that priests and religious who anticipated the law of the Church in this matter by their zeal for the Spiritual Exercises will in the future use this means of grace with even greater diligence, now that they are urged to it by the graver obligations of the Sacred Canons.

Urged Upon Secular Clergy

We therefore urge the secular clergy to be faithful in this matter of the Exercises, at least up to the mod-

erate standard which the Code of Canon Law imposes. Let them fulfill this obligation with an ardent desire for perfection, so as to obtain for themselves an abundance of that supernatural spirit which is so vital to them for the improvement of their flock and for gaining great conquests for Christ. This is the way that was trodden by all those priests who were distinguished by their love of souls. It was in this fashion that they brought their neighbors into the paths of holiness and formed the clergy. Of this an example can be seen in the life of Joseph Cafasso, whom We Ourselves beatified. This holy man always gave great care to the Spiritual Exercises so that both he and other ministers of Christ might grow in holiness and in knowledge of the will of God. Thus on one occasion when he was coming out of retreat, inspired by a divine revelation, he made known to a certain young priest who had him for confessor the way which would lead him to perfection. The young priest was the Blessed John Bosco, whose glory is beyond praise.

As for those who are in the religious life, they are obliged by law to make annual retreats. There can be no doubt but that they will derive from them great spiritual goods and helps to greater perfection and to the more perfect maintenance of the evangelical counsels. For the annual Exercises are the mystical "tree of life" by which both individuals and communities will have that praise of holiness which should belong to every religious family.

Let not the clergy think that time thus spent will

harm their ministry. Let them listen to St. Bernard, who did not hesitate to write to Pope Eugenius III, whose teacher he had been: "If you wish altogether to belong to all,, after the example of Him who was all things to all men, then your humanity is praiseworthy—yet only if it be complete. But how will it be complete if you leave out yourself? You also are a man: therefore, that your feeling for all mankind may be full, let that heart embrace you which embraces all: what profit to you to gain all if you lose yourself? Therefore, while all possess you, possess yourself. Remember, I do not say always. I do not say often. But sometimes belong to yourself."

Lay Retreats "Most Useful"

No less is Our desire, Venerable Brethren, to have the ranks and associations of lay Catholics trained in the Spiritual Exercises. We shall never cease insisting on these organizations as a most useful (not to say necessary) adjunct to the Apostolic Hierarchy. We cannot sufficiently express the pleasure We had in hearing that almost everywhere series of conferences are organized in which these peaceful yet strenuous soldiers of Christ, especially the new recruits, are drilled. They come to these retreats in great numbers. They thus become fitter for fighting the battles of the Lord. They find help for perfecting themselves in the Christian life. Not seldom they hear interiorly that secret voice of God urging them to undertake the sacred responsibility of the salvation of souls. A splendid dawn, indeed, which should be followed

shortly by a perfect day, if the custom of retreats be spread and carefully fostered among Catholic societies, especially those consisting of young people.

It is a truly wonderful disposition of Divine Providence that this spiritual treasure should be provided for the masses of the people at this time. For it is a time in which temporal goods and consequent material well-being tend to spread more among the working-men and the people generally. The retreat movement therefore counterbalances the influence of these material goods, so that their possession shall not drag down the people to materialism whether theoretical or practical.

We therefore extend Our approval and paternal encouragement to the Retreat Movements which already exist in certain countries, especially to those timely ones, the Workers' Retreats and their associated Leagues of Perseverance. We recommend them earnestly, Venerable Brethren, to your care and solicitude.

Some Cautions About Exercises

But all that We have said about the Exercises and their marvelous results supposes that they be practiced in the proper way, and that they do not become a commonplace habit, practiced without enthusiasm, and having consequently little or no effect on the soul.

First of all, the Exercises must be made in retreat, and away from the distraction of ordinary occupations, as the "Imitation of Christ" so beautifully says: "It is in silence and quiet that the devout soul advances."

Public Spiritual Exercises are certainly good. They

are to be promoted by pastoral zeal. They are greatly blessed by our Lord. But We wish particularly to insist on closed retreats. In these, one is more securely separated from creatures, and in the silence the soul attends more closely to itself and God.

Besides, the Spiritual Exercises require a certain length of time in order to have their effect. According to circumstances this period may vary from a few days to an entire month. But if we wish to have all the advantages enumerated above, the time should not be too short. Our body does not experience the effect of health resorts unless it stay there for a certain length of time.. So our soul needs to be subject for a sufficient time to this spiritual treatment, if it wishes to be restored and to come away with new vigor.

Lastly, a most important condition is to make the Exercises according to a wise and practical method.

St. Ignatius' Method Lauded

Now among all the laudable methods that exist and that are inspired by the sound principles of Catholic asceticism, there is one which has attracted the full and repeated approval of this Apostolic See, which had won fullest praise from saints and masters of the spiritual life, which has reaped great harvests of holiness for four centuries. We allude to the method of St. Ignatius Loyola, of him whom we love to call the Specialist of the Exercises. His little book of Spiritual Exercises is small in bulk but precious in content. From the day that it was solemnly approved, praised

and recommended by Our predecessor, Paul III of holy memory, from that day (to use again words written by Ourselves before Our Pontificate) the book "almost instantly established and imposed itself as the wisest and most universal code for the government of souls, as the inexhaustible source of deep and solid piety, as an irresistible stimulus and secure guide to conversion and to the highest spirituality and perfection." And when at the beginning of Our Pontificate, in the Apostolic Constitution "Summorum Pontificum" of July 25, 1922, "in compliance with the wishes and desires of the Hierarchy of both rites," We declared Ignatius Loyola "the heavenly patron of the Spiritual Exercises, and of all institutes, sodalities and associations which assist those who are making the Spiritual Exercises," when We did this We only sanctioned with Our supreme authority what was commonly felt by both pastors and faithful. It had been implicitly said on numerous occasions by Our Predecessors when they praised the Exercises of St. Ignatius, especially in addition to Pope Paul III, by Alexander VII, Benedict XIV and Leo XIII. In the same thought concur those who attained or increased their spiritual strength in this school of the Exercises, and who (to use the words of Our Predecessor of happy memory, Leo XIII) "whether for their ascetic doctrine or for sanctity of life have flourished" in the last four centuries.

The solidity of spiritual teaching, far from the dangers and illusions of the pseudo-mystics, the marvelous adaptation to every class and condition of persons (from souls given to contemplative life to men

living in the world), the organic unity of its parts, the remarkable order in which the truths to be meditated are succeeded by spiritual instructions suitable to lead a man from the point where he is freed from sin to the most sublime peaks of spirituality, by the road of abnegation and victory over passion, all these things render the method of St. Ignatius the most commendable and the most effective.

Fruits Must Be Maintained

It remains for Us, Venerable Brethren, to maintain in souls the fruit of the Spiritual Exercises and to awaken again their salutary impressions by recommending a pious usage, a compendious renewal of them, by a monthly or quarterly retreat. This is a custom, as Our venerated Predecessor Pius X said, which "We rejoice to see introduced in many places," especially in religious communities and among priests. We also desire earnestly to see it extended among the laity, so much the more because this practice could sometimes replace the Exercises themselves when they are not possible.

Thus, Venerable Brethren, with the spread and fervent use of the Exercises in all classes of society, We promise Ourselves the most salutary fruits of regeneration, of spiritual life, of apostolic zeal, and, as a consequence, of individual and social peace.

It was in the silence of a mysterious night, far from the world's turmoil, in a solitary place, that the eternal Word made flesh revealed Himself to man, and that the angelic song rang out: "Glory to God in the high-

est and on earth peace to men of good will." This song of Christian peace—peace which is the supreme desire of Our apostolic heart and the goal to which Our hopes and efforts tend—this song will strongly resound in the souls of all Christians who will retire into the silence, far from the noisy discord of modern life, to meditate the truths of Faith and the mysteries of Him who brought to the world and left as His most precious heritage the gift of peace: "My peace I give you."

The Salutation of Peace

This salutation of peace We send to you, Venerable Brethren, on this day on which We complete Our fifty years of priesthood under the influence and almost on the eve of the most sweet mystery of peace, the Nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ. With this wish We impart to you, to your clergy, to your people, in short, to all Our great and beloved Catholic family, the Apostolic Benediction.

Given at Rome at St. Peter's, December 20, 1929,
the Seventh Year of Our Pontificate.

The Pope Speaks:

“We earnestly desire to see the Spiritual Exercises daily extended more widely, not only among the clergy, both secular and regular, but also among the multitudes of the Catholic laity.”—*Mens Nostra*.

“We are clearly taught that in these Spiritual Exercises there is a wonderful power of bringing peace to men and of carrying them upwards to holiness of life.”—*Mens Nostra*.

“For in that school of the spirit not only are excellent Christians formed, but real apostles of every state of life are trained and enkindled with the fire of the Heart of Christ.”—*Quadragesimo Anno*.

“Above all, let them (the clergy) hold in high esteem and employ with diligence for the benefit of their disciples the Spiritual Exercise, a most precious means of personal and social reform.”—*Quadragesimo Anno*.

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