

1. Introduction.

Sr. Teresa Clements in her doctoral thesis entitled “Instruments of Mercy” has listed 42 spiritual themes to be found in the letters of the Founder. (Page 157). Amongst these themes is to be found Gentleness (Douceur) which occurs 89 times in his letters to the Daughters of Mary and Joseph.

Since the 2nd Vatican Council religious congregations have been urged to return to the sources of all Christian life and to the original spirit of their institutes. (Perfectae Caritatis 2) and since the ultimate norm of the religious life is the following of Christ set forth in the Gospels, this must be their highest rule. (Perfectae Caritatis 2a)

The important question is to what extent is the Founder’s insistence on *gentleness* a Gospel value?

2. Gentleness - Douceur a virtue based on Scripture.

The first thing to notice is that it is a virtue which has its basis in Scripture. There are 2 Greek words in the New Testament which signify meek/gentle (*praus*) and gentleness (*prautes*)

The Greek word meek/gentle (“**praus**”) is used 4 times in the New Testament.

Mt 5:5 *Blessed are the **meek** (gentle)*

11:29 *Come to me all you who labor and are overburdened, and I will give you rest. Shoulder my yoke and learn from me, for I am **gentle (praus)** and humble of heart, and you will find rest for your souls.*

21:5 *humble (**praus**) and mounted on a donkey*

1 Peter 3.4 *Do not dress up for show doing up your hair, wearing gold bracelets and fine clothes; ·all this should be inside, in a person's heart, imperishable: the ornament of a sweet and **gentle (praus)** disposition-this is what is precious in the sight of God.*

Jesus is **praus** - gentle

The noun **praotes** "meekness" "gentleness" is used 11 times in the New Testament.

1 Corinthians 4:21

*It is for you to decide : do I come with a stick in my hand or in a spirit of love and **gentleness (praotes)** ?*

2 Corinthians 10.1

*This is a personal matter; this is Paul himself appealing to you by the gentleness a (**praotes**) and patience of Christ.*

Galatians 5.23

*What the Spirit brings is very different: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, trustfulness, **gentleness (praotes)** and self-control.*

Galatians 6.1

*if one of you misbehaves, the more spiritual of you who set him right should do so in a spirit of **gentleness (praotes)**, not forgetting that you may be tempted yourselves.*

Ephesians 4.2

*Bear with one another charitably, in complete selflessness, **gentleness (praotes)** and patience.*

Colossians 3.12

*You are God's chosen race, his saints; he loves you, and you should be clothed in sincere compassion, in kindness and humility, **gentleness (praotes)** and patience.*
2 Timothy 2.25

*He has to be **gentle (praotes)** when he corrects people who dispute what he says,*
Titus 3.2

*Remind them to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work, to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarrelling, to be gentle and to show every courtesy (**praotes**) to everyone. (NRSV Translation)*

James 1.21
*Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with **meekness (proaotes)** the implanted word which has power to save you? (NRSV Translation)*

James 3.12
*Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with **gentleness (praotes)** born of wisdom. (NRSV Translation)*

1 Peter 3.16
*Always be ready to make your defiance to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you: yet do it with **gentleness (praotes)** and reverence. (NSRV Translation)*

These texts give us some idea of how the virtue of gentleness is to be lived out.

3. Praus / Praotes Gentle / Gentleness

It is useful to look at the word gentle or meek in Classical Greek.

Aristotle discussed it.

For Aristotle every virtue consisted in the mean which lies between two extremes. He defined "Meekness" "Gentleness" as the mean which lies between excessive anger on the one hand and excessive angerlessness on the other.

The noun "Meek" "Gentle" praus

In classical Greek this word is used of a beast which has been tamed; of a horse which was once wild but which has become obedient to the bit and bridle.

Now herein lays the secret meaning of praus "Meek" or "Gentle". There is gentleness but behind this gentleness there is strength. The woman or man who is praus is someone who is under perfect control.

We are not talking about a spineless gentleness, a sentimental fondness, a passive quietism. It is a strength under control. (2 hands in Rembrandts painting of the Prodigal Son)

Such a characteristic is not something we can attain to ourselves. Not something we can reach by our own efforts. It is a fruit of the presence of the Holy Spirit in us.

Praus is strength under control but it is not self control.

A woman, a man who is *praus* is God controlled.

We should pray that God will make us *praus*, masters of ourselves, for only then can we become the servants of others - like Jesus.

4. The Fathers of the Faith Van Crombrughe's formative experience.

It was at Amiens that the Founder learned the powerful value of gentleness in the world of education.

At St Acheul he came into contact with the Fathers of the Faith.

Teresa Clements writes:

“In reading about the early days of the Fathers of the faith in France, one is left with the impression that both the confidence that the priests had in the providence and mercy of God and the gentleness with which they treated others, were the fruits of prayers and the seclusion they had lived they had lived as the fathers of the Sacred Heart of Jesus as well as of the suffering they had experienced during the time of union.” Clements. *Instrument in the hand of God*. page 24.

5. Gentleness in the Founder's letters.

The Founder constantly urged his spiritual daughters and sons to practice gentleness.

Gentleness in the DMJ Letters. (89 references)

Here is a short selection

Catherine Dal. 23 feb 1838

On Wednesday at 4 o'clock in the afternoon, our beloved Sister Aloyse went to heaven to receive the reward God is preparing there for his spouses. You are acquainted with that purity of vision and the acts of **gentleness** and of charity that is embellished by generosity of heart and amiability of manners, in a word, you know the angelic behaviour of this young spouse of Jesus Christ; so you will allow me, Reverend Mother, not to enlarge on it. I adore the holy will of God, and I am silent; my heart is still too moved; I still feel too keenly the loss our Institute is undergoing to speak of it with moderation.

Olympiade Derville 30 December 1835

I was touched, Reverend Mother, on reading your last letter; the graces our good God is granting to your dear Sisters and to you in particular, arouse in me feelings of lively gratitude. From the depths of my heart I have thanked the Lord Jesus for the marks of tenderness he continually bestows on you. The lights you have received on your spiritual needs are precious favours; receive them with gratitude and apply to your heavenly Spouse, who will grant you the qualities, the virtues he wishes to find in you, and that he is kind enough to point out to you. I have done my best, it seems to me, to obtain for you **gentleness**, simplicity and candour. May the divine

Child be touched by the good will that animates you, and we will employ in his service all that he deigns to give you. Are not those your sentiments, my dear Child?

Olympiade 28 February 1836.

On returning from my confessional yesterday evening, my dear Reverend Mother, I found your letter, and although I always experience great satisfaction at the sight of your letters, a sad presentiment warned me that I was to experience a painful sentiment. I began to pray before reading you, and in spite of that means, my heart was painfully affected by the news that the unhappy rebellious child gives me. However, your good sentiments, my dear child, and those of your other Sisters eased my pain. The night gradually restored me, and after the celebration of Holy Mass, I find myself not only relieved but consoled and in profound peace, submissive to the adorable will of our good God. I can even see a good for the Institute in the misfortune of a person who does not want any of the happiness we wanted for her. A dead branch cut off from the trunk frees the latter and makes it more vigorous, more long-lived. So, console yourself, my child, committing everything to divine Providence who draws the good of his glory out of evil itself. No more sadness, no more heartbreak; but peace, **gentleness**, complete submission to Jesus Christ.

Olympiade 26 January 1837

Celebrate the feast of St. Francis de Sales, very dear Child, with that moderation regarding which that saint gave both such fine examples and such admirable precepts. You will not forget me, I hope, that day. I have always loved St. Francis de Sales; I ought to have imitated him?; God frequently urged me to do so, but, to my shame, I must admit that I have not. I am going to begin again to make efforts, although age and deep-rooted habits no longer render the practice of **gentleness** as easy as it would have been in my youth. Help me, I beg you, through the **gentleness** and mercy of Jesus Christ.

Olympiade 28th January 1838.

Lets us pray and act, but with **gentleness** and confidence. I have already entrusted our affairs to St Francis de Sales, I will do it again especially tomorrow.

Olympiade 29th September 1843

I congratulate you in particular, my dear daughter, for the progress in **gentleness** and amiability which you have noticed in yourself.

Olympiade 21 February 1845

Try, my dear daughter, to always work to form yourself in **gentleness** and to be a good example of this virtue to all your children. It is the surest way of winning the confidence and affection of the pupils. The class room mistresses must follow our example and the young persons in their turn will follow the example of their teachers.

6. Conclusion

The Founder attached great importance to the virtue of **gentleness (douceur)**. He understood it to be essential both in community life and in the apostolate especially in the classroom.

Gentleness is a virtue we find in the Gospels. Jesus too was gentle and we are called to incarnate that gentleness in our own lives as followers of Jesus and as spiritual daughters of the Founder.

We are to imitate Jesus in his Gentleness and Humility. We are called to make it a reality in our community and our apostolate.

Gentleness is the fruit of the H. Spirit within us. The Gospel qualities of **gentleness** or **meekness** are to be at the heart of the way we live the Gospel and at the heart of what it means to be a spiritual daughter of van Crombrugghe.

Our preparation for the bicentenary of our foundation is an ideal time to look into our hearts and into the way we live and ask ourselves this question:

Are we going our best to grow in gentleness in our hearts and make it a reality in the way we live together in community and in the we encounter all those who come into our lives?

Robert Hamilton CJ