

V2_1st_after_Epiphany= The Mission of the Word of God for Procrastinating Sinners
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Feast of the Holy Family

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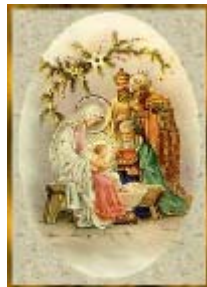
U.I.O.G.D.

Ave Maria!

Jesus, Mary, Joseph, we love You, save souls
O God come to our assistance. Jesus, Mary, Joseph please make haste to help us!

+ + + Jesus, Mary, Joseph + + +

Volume two = The Penitent Christian



FIRST SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

The Mission of the Word of God for Procrastinating Sinners

“They found him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the doctors, hearing them and asking them questions.” St. Luke 2: 46.

As our Lord Jesus Christ, when he wished to show his unheard of love to men, could not wait for the time of his bitter Passion and death, to shed his Saving Blood for them, but already as an Infant, eight days old, poured out the first drops of that precious Blood in the Circumcision, so, he would not wait for the time of his public mission to instruct and convert men, but commenced his office of Preacher in the twelfth year of his age, when he was found amongst the doctors in the temple, explaining the *law* to them by question and answer. Ah! If we had only the happiness of once hearing, as they did, the word of life from his *own* sacred lips, what an effect would it not have on our hearts! But what am I saying? Although it is now nearly two thousand years since he appeared in the world in visible form, he still preaches his divine word and explains his law by the mouths of

priests. Alas! I should rather exclaim, would that all Christians were diligent enough in hearing his word. Then, indeed, would Christ reap a golden harvest.

I. In the sanctification of the just, and

II. In the conversion of sinners.

I. To every habitual sinner here present (but God forbid that there should be any!), I put the question: Do you wish, sooner or later, to save your soul and go to heaven? Or have you renounced all right to heaven, and determined to be lost forever? One of these alternatives you must choose; there is no third way for you. Have you chosen the latter? Have you made up your mind to burn forever in the fire of hell amongst the demons?

Alas! If such is the case, you are already in the state of despair, and I do not wonder that you have no desire to hear the word of God, to come to a sermon. But I can hardly believe that any Catholic in his right senses can form such a desperate resolution as that. Do you then expect some day or other to save your soul, and be happy forever with God in heaven? If so, you must be converted to God by repentance, for that is the one, indispensably necessary means which you must adopt in order to save your soul. And your sorrow and repentance must be *sincere*; they must be *interior*, — in the will; they must be supernatural; they must be universal and sovereign. It will not profit you to confess your sins or make restitution as the traitor Judas did when he gave back to the high priests the money he had received from them; nor like the wicked king Antiochus, under the natural fear of impending death, to ask pardon of God and promise to repent. Your repentance must be founded on faith; you must hate and detest all your sins without a single exception, because they have offended God, and you must earnestly purpose never more to relapse into them.

But this repentance and conversion can never be the fruit of your own natural strength. You require thereto the preventing and helping grace of God; and that, too, a special, extraordinary, powerful grace, which God is not bound to give to any sinner. He has the most indisputable right to condemn at once to hell him who has committed a mortal sin; and the grace that converts such a sinner, must be one that enlightens the understanding as to the malice, gravity, and deformity of sin, while, at the same time, it moves and impels the will to a sovereign sorrow and detestation of it. Now, when and where do you expect this extraordinary grace, which comes solely from the great mercy of God, this sudden change and conversion of your whole heart? Perhaps in your bed, where you waste the morning in unnecessary sleep? Or in your place of business, where your mind is filled to distraction with worldly cares and concerns? Or at pleasure parties and idle entertainments? Or at table, while you are enjoying yourself eating and drinking and indulging your sensuality? Or even in the house of God, where the precept of the Church compels you to present yourself on Sundays and holydays, if you have still so much fear of the Lord left, and where you hear holy Mass with a cold and distracted heart? No; these are neither the places nor the occupations in which the Holy Spirit of God will find your heart ready for the influence of this great grace.

True, Almighty God, in whose hand are the hearts of all men, can give that grace in any place, at any time, under any circumstances. Sinners have sometimes been converted suddenly, unexpectedly, as it were, in a moment; as when Saul was struck blind by a light from heaven, while on his way to imprison and persecute the Christians. Sinners have sometimes been converted by some dismal apparition in the dead of the night, by the fright of a terrible thunderstorm, or the sudden death of a friend. They have occasionally been moved to repentance and amendment of life by great losses or misfortunes, disgraces or sufferings. But, as theologians teach, God does not generally act in this way: a conversion of this sort is a rare, unusual, so to speak, a miraculous event, which no man can reasonably hope for, or presumptuously desire. Still another means of repentance and conversion for the sinner, is a serious and recollected meditation on the eternal truths, according to the words of God to the prophet Osee; "Behold, I will lead her, the soul, into the wilderness; and I will speak to her heart." That is to say: I will speak to the soul in solitude, and so vividly show her her unhappy state, as to excite her to repentance and contrition. But a means of this kind is not apt to be adopted by a worldling continually distracted with worldly cares, who hardly knows what to meditate on; still less by an habitual sinner who has closed his heart to the voice and invitation of God. Moreover, the very desire or inclination to meditate upon heavenly things, is the first preventing grace that God gives you for your conversion; and, according to the usual course of divine Providence, it is bestowed in a fitting time and place on a heart that is more or less disposed to receive it.

Hence, there is no other means for the sinner but to hear frequently the word of God in sermons. The Holy Ghost speaks to the hearts of men by the living voice of his servants, whom he has commissioned to preach his word. This is the ordinary, and at the same time, the most powerful means of moving the sinner to true repentance and conversion. This is the "two edged sword," as St. Paul calls it, which penetrates the heart, and pierces it with sorrow for sin: "For the word of God is living and effectual, and more piercing than any two-edged sword; and reaching unto the division of the soul and the spirit." This is the burning fire, as God himself calls it by the prophet Jeremias, which consumes all earthly and wicked desires and inclinations: "Are not my words as a fire? saith the Lord; and as a hammer that breaketh the rock in pieces?" that is to say, have they not the power to soften, to move to contrition the hardened heart of the habitual sinner? This is that wonderful light which displays before the eyes of the sinner the truths of eternity, and wakens him suddenly, by remorse of conscience, out of the deep sleep of sin, so that at last he surrenders to the irresistible influence of the known truth.

And such has been the experience of many who, through idle curiosity, and while their hearts were still obdurate in evil, happened to hear a single sermon, and went away from it filled with true contrition by an unexpected ray of light from heaven. Palladius writes of a certain man named Moses, who, having been deprived of the office he held at court on account of some great crime he had committed, instead of acknowledging his guilt and trying to amend his life, plunged still deeper into the most enormous crimes, until he became at last the chief of a band of robbers. He happened once to enter a church, not out

of piety, but probably with the intention of committing a robbery. Fortunately for him, the sermon had just begun, and the preacher was describing the strict account we shall have to render at the judgment seat, the terrible sentence that shall be passed on the wicked, and the joyful invitation that the children of God shall receive to eternal happiness. After hearing this sermon, Moses became quite another man. Filled with sorrow and weeping bitterly, he left the church, and went to an adjacent monastery, where, having got rid of the heavy burden of his sins, and having received permission to enter the order, he spent the remainder of his life in the greatest mortification and sanctity.

Truly, “the word of God is living and effectual, and more piercing than any two-edged sword;” and if it produces such effects by a single sermon on sinners who go to hear it merely by chance, or through curiosity, and with evil projects actually in their hearts, what may we not expect it to accomplish in those sinners who frequently and regularly hear sermons with a sincere desire to learn something good, and to be moved to repentance? Must they not be softened at last, brought to acknowledge their guilt, and return to God?

Oh, well does the envious demon know that, humanly speaking, it is impossible for him to long claim as his slave, the man who sincerely desires to hear the word of God!

Hence, he spares no effort to keep men away from sermons; lest through hearing them, they should become pious, and escape out of his clutches. When the time comes for the sermon, he fills their minds with all kinds of business, which, he persuades them, is of the greatest importance and must be attended to at once; he gets them into talk with others, so that they may be kept at home; he excites wicked people to make fun of the preacher, so that they may not care to hear him; he persuades them that the hour appointed for the sermon is too early and inconvenient; that the weather is too warm or too cold, too damp, too windy, too harsh, and that they would injure their health if they ventured out of doors. But if he cannot keep them away altogether, he at least tries to prevent them from coming in time, so that they may not derive proper fruit from the sermon.

II. Woe to you, O Christian, if you allow the lying spirit to thus deceive you, and prevent you from hearing the word of God! “Never trust thy enemy,” is the warning that the Holy Ghost gives us all by the wise *Ecclesiasticus*; and still less should you trust the enemy of your soul, “for as a brass pot, his wickedness rusteth.” But you especially, O habitual sinners, do not, for God’s sake, allow the tempter to befool you, if you have any hope of saving your soul and going to heaven! I tell you distinctly, that if you do not hear the word of God, there is no other means of conversion and repentance left to you. And further, you may be perfectly convinced that, if you are not moved to repent and amend your life by hearing the word of God, you will never be moved to repentance by any other means, even if God were to work a miracle in your favor, which he will not do. “Yes,” says St. John Chrysostom, “even if one were to rise from the dead, or an angel to descend from heaven,” to exhort you to repentance and contrition for your sins; not even then would you be induced to do sincere penance, or to be really converted, if the word of God, which is far more impressive and powerful than other means, cannot influence you.

This is what our Lord wishes us to understand by the parable in the Gospel of St. Luke. When the rich glutton, in the midst of the fearful torments of hell, raised his eyes and

beheld Lazarus, whom during life he had despised as less than a dog, reposing in glory in Abraham's bosom, "Ah! "Said he, "Father, I beseech thee that thou wouldst send him to my father's house, for I have five brethren, that he may testify unto them, lest they also come into this place of torments." And what answer did Abraham make? "They have Moses and the Prophets," he said, "let them hear them," meaning, they will preach to them. "No," said the other; "No, Father Abraham; but if one went to them from the dead, they will do penance;" the sight of a ghost would have such an effect on them, that they would amend their lives. No, said Abraham, you are grievously mistaken; if the word of God, which the Prophets preach to them, cannot convert them, much less could a dead man help them; and if your brothers do not care to listen to the prophets, they will have still less inclination to hear one from the dead. "If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they believe if one rise again from the dead."

Remember, O sinner (apart from the terrible tortures in store for you hereafter), the very neglect to profit by the word of God is in itself a divine punishment. Hear the threat that God utters by the prophet Jeremias: "Thus saith the Lord of Hosts: Behold I will send upon them the sword, and the famine, and I will persecute them with the sword and with famine; and I will give them up unto affliction to all the kingdoms of the earth; to be a curse, and an astonishment, and a hissing, and a reproach to all the nations." And why? what have they done? "Because they have not hearkened to my words, saith the Lord, which I sent to them by my servants, the Prophets." And what kind of a famine was God to inflict on them? He explains it by the prophet Amos:

"Behold the days come, saith the Lord; and I will send forth a famine into the land; not a famine of bread, nor a thirst of water, but of hearing the word of the Lord." They do not care for my word; they hardly deign to hear it; hence, their punishment shall be that I will deprive them of all inclination and desire to hear it. They are not worthy of that spiritual food; therefore, they shall perish with hunger, and shall live and die in the unhappy state of sin. Certainly, a most fearful punishment: thus by a hidden decree of God's Providence, his holy word is withdrawn from those who do not deserve to be aroused by grace to amend their lives.

It is a punishment which presages the sinner's eternal damnation in hell. Remarkable is the well-known simile in which Jesus Christ distinguishes between the elect and the reprobate: "And he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on his left." Thus the sheep are a figure of the elect, and the goats of the reprobate. But the prophet David, speaking of sinners, says: "They are laid in hell like sheep; death shall feed upon them." How can that be? If, according to the words of our Lord, the sheep shall be on his right hand at the last day, how can the expression, "They are laid in hell like sheep," be justified? Yet, says St. Augustine, both those texts are true; all who belong to the true Church are sheep of the fold of Jesus Christ, who says of himself, "I am the good Shepherd." All who belong to his fold are sheep; but all are not elect sheep. But how can we distinguish the elect from the reprobate? They who acknowledge Jesus Christ as their Shepherd, are the elect; "I know mine, and mine know me." They on the other hand, that do not acknowledge him, are reprobate sheep. Our Lord himself says: "My sheep (my

elect), hear my voice;” and they will be placed at the Last Day on my right hand. Those who do not hear my voice, my word, are sheep indeed; but they are not *my* sheep; “they are laid in hell like sheep.”

Amongst the latter was that unhappy man of whom James de Vitry writes that he could never be persuaded to go to a sermon.

“What do I want with sermons?” he would say; “I can preach well enough for myself!” At last he died, and his body was brought to the church to be buried. During the funeral office that, according to the custom of the Catholic Church, was recited for the soul of the deceased man, all who were present suddenly saw to their great consternation, the figure of our Lord on the crucifix, that was placed at the head of the coffin, tear its hands from the nails, and stop both its ears with them. The priest, seeing this, turned to the people and said to them: “You well know what this means. During his life, this man neglected the word of God, and never went to a sermon, therefore, God now closes his ears, so as not to hear the prayers we are offering for his soul. All is clear enough, that his soul is in hell. There is no use praying for him any more, nor shall his body be buried in consecrated ground! Let it be buried out in the field!” And so it was done.

“He that hath ears to hear, let him hear,” said Christ, speaking of the seed of the word of God. I conclude with the same words, my dear brethren: “He that hath ears to hear,” let him be diligent in hearing the word of God; for it is necessary for all men frequently to hear it, if they wish to save their souls. It is necessary for the innocent and the just, that they may be encouraged and strengthened to continue in the divine service, to abstain from sin, and always belong to the number of those chosen sheep who hear the voice of their Shepherd. It is especially necessary for those who are actually in the state of sin, that they may be moved to repentance and amendment, if they would not be numbered among the reprobate sheep, who are rejected by the Shepherd, and doomed to hell. Merciful God, save us from that terrible fate! We who are here present all declare that we desire to be together at thy right hand, among thy chosen sheep; and therefore, we have met to-day to hear thy voice, to learn thy law, and to fulfil thy holy will! We thank thee, O God of goodness, that thou hast given to us such frequent opportunities of hearing thy word, in preference to so many others to whom the bread of life is broken but sparingly. We receive that word with the most heartfelt gratitude, and we shall always be ready to follow the light that thou sheddest on us so abundantly. Nothing but absolute necessity shall prevent us from hearing thy warning voice, so that we may, one day, to our great joy, hear thy sweet invitation to eternal bliss: Come, ye blessed of my Father, and follow me into the eternal kingdom. Amen.

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Do you believe this statement in this sermon?

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