

V3_5th_after_Epiphany= The Lawfulness of Joy of Conscience on Account of Good Works
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U.I.O.G.D.
Ave Maria!

Jesus, Mary, Joseph, we love Thee, save souls
O God come to our assistance. Jesus, Mary, Joseph please make haste to help us!
+ + + Jesus, Mary, Joseph + + +
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FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

The Lawfulness of Joy of Conscience on Account of Good Works

“But the wheat gather ye into my barn,” Matt. 13: 30.

The weeds represent bad, the wheat good works. The weeds go into the fire, the wheat into the barn. What different expressions of countenance there will be seen on the last day, when the wicked shall be sent to hell on account of their evil deeds, and the good shall be invited by their Judge to enter heaven on account of their good works. Rejoice confidently in the Lord, you who have a good conscience. That joy is most pleasing to God and very beneficial to your souls; for God requires a cheerful service from us, and that joy is the best encouragement to the soul to continue serving God and practicing virtue. Now let us hear what might be said against this. That joy, by which we exult in our good conscience and in our good works, seems to run counter to the Christian virtue of humility, which is so necessary to all men, and by which we must have a mean opinion of ourselves, and run counter to the example of the Saints, who followed an entirely different plan; But I say

I. Joy harmonizes easily with true Christian humility;

II. It harmonizes easily with the examples of humility given us by the holy servants of God.

I. Is it not presumption, secret vanity, and self-complacency to admire one's own good works, approve of them, think them worthy of praise, take pleasure in them, rejoice at them, and centre one's delight and satisfaction in them? What else is that but placing one's self in the proximate occasion of becoming proud and conceited, as if one had done

extraordinarily great things? Is it not taking occasion from one's good works to become slothful in the divine service, like that rich man, who said to himself: "Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years: take thy rest, eat, drink, and make good cheer?" (Luke 12: 19.) Would not a man be exposed to the same danger, who sets himself to consider the good works he has performed with a pure conscience during his life, and takes pleasure in them? Might not he, too, exclaim: My soul, behold thou art in a good state; thou hast done much good, and gathered many treasures for heaven with thy zeal? Rest now; make good cheer; thou hast labored enough, and canst now enjoy thyself?

Quite different to that was the conduct of pious and holy men who wished to save their souls and get to heaven after death! They had a mean opinion of themselves and of all their actions. Although they avoided with the utmost care the least shadow of sin, yet they looked on themselves as poor sinners; nay, they both thought and proclaimed themselves to be the greatest sinners in the whole world. Perfect and wonderful were their virtuous works; yet, they thought they had done nothing for heaven; so far were they from looking on them as deserving of praise, and often did they find fault with them, although in reality there was nothing in them that could be condemned. Let us take only one example. What a holy man Job was! God himself says that he had no servant on earth like Job. What a virtuous man he was in prosperity! "I was clad with justice," he says of himself, "and I clothed myself with my judgment, as with a robe and a diadem. I was an eye to the blind, and a foot to the lame. I was the father of the poor" (Job 29: 14, 16). How patient he was in misfortunes and sufferings of body and soul! How submissively he accepted those crosses from the hands of God, and in the midst of them praised and blessed his God with an undisturbed mind! And yet what an opinion he had of himself! "I feared all my works," he said with humility. "If I would justify myself, my own mouth shall condemn me" (Job 9: 28, 20). Job dares not to speak to God of his justice; and shall I flatter myself with the idea that I am leading a holy life, and indulge in that thought with pleasure, satisfaction, and joy? Oh, no! let me only have a mean opinion of myself and be always afraid.

I acknowledge that this objection is a specious one, yet if we take it in the right sense it will not militate against the truth, that we can and with reason must rejoice at the good works of which our conscience says to us that they were performed according to the will of God. And to answer the first question; if that joy were vanity, idle boasting, or presumption, then we should have reason to accuse David, that man after God's own heart, of being vain, boastful, and presumptuous; for in many of the psalms, especially in the 118th, he recounts before God, to his own great consolation, how he kept himself free from sin, and observed the divine law. If that joy is vanity, then Exechias, one of the holiest kings of Juda, could be accused of vainglory and presumption, for when he was at the point of death he spoke to God thus confidently: "I beseech thee, O Lord, remember how I have walked before thee in truth, and with a perfect heart, and have done that which is good in thy sight;" a prayer that was so pleasing to God that he spared the king's life for fifteen years (Is. 38: 3). If that joy is vanity, then St. Paul was a boastful, vain, presumptuous man, for the greatest joy of his life was in his good conscience, according to his own

words: “Our glory is this, the testimony of our conscience” (2. Cor. 1: 12). And what was the testimony of his conscience? It was in that that he placed all his joy and glory. If that joy is vanity, then Job himself was vain and presumptuous, when his friends came to comfort him in his misery as he sat on the dung-hill, and attributed his calamities to his sins; for he told them how he had led an innocent life, and found his consolation in the thought of it: “If I shall be judged, I know that I shall be found just” (Job. 13: 18). Hear how he rejoices at the future reward in store for him; although I am now a man of sorrows and abandoned by all, “I know that my Redeemer liveth . . . and in my flesh I shall see my God. Whom I myself shall see and my eyes shall behold; . . . this my hope is laid up in my bosom” (Job 19: 25, 27). But it would be the height of presumption to accuse those holy men and many others like them of vanity and boasting.

It would indeed be vanity if one were to publish his good works, and the graces and gifts bestowed on his soul, in order to gain the praise and esteem of men, as the Pharisees did. It would be self-conceit if one were to think himself better than others, or to despise them on account of his good works. It would be presumption if I were to ascribe to myself and my own powers the good I do. It would be presumption if I were to pretend, either to myself or to others, that my actions are so good and perfect that they could not be done better, and that the least fault or defect cannot be found in them. But to live in peace, consolation, and joy when our conscience tells us that we have hitherto avoided sin; to rejoice that we do nothing against God; to rejoice when we do good, because we thus fulfill our obligations, do the will of God, and please and honor him thereby; to consider our good works and be glad on account of them, thus exciting ourselves to renewed zeal in the divine service, to greater patience in adversity, and to a firmer confidence in God, to consider our good works, and offer due thanks to God for them as for a great benefit; no one could look on that as vanity, or seeking for praise, and still less as presumption. That is acting reasonably, sensibly, and judging of the matter as it really is in itself; that is truly rejoicing in the Lord.

II. No matter what good we do, we should never grow proud, but be always humble, like the Saints: at the same time, however, we should rejoice in our good works.

1. *To say that the Saints always condemned and though nothing of their good works is not true.* It is very true that in spite of their holy lives they had a mean and low opinion of themselves; it is the opinion we must all have of ourselves, remembering that everything that is good and praiseworthy in us comes from above from the generous hand of the Lord. Although St. Paul rejoices in his good conscience and in the works he performed for the glory of God, yet he humbly ascribed all, not to himself alone, but to the grace of God working with him: “By the grace of God I am what I am; and his grace in me hath not been void, but I have labored more abundantly than all they: yet not I, but the grace of God with me” (I. Cor. 15: 10). It is one thing to have a good opinion of myself and another to take pleasure in and esteem my works when they are good and according to the will of God; and that distinction we must carefully observe; for while the latter joy is praiseworthy the former is altogether unjustifiable.

2. *But the holy servants of God have always looked on themselves and publicly proclaimed themselves as sinners.* That is true, and they were perfectly right; for we can and must look on ourselves as sinners, no matter what we are. Why? Because we can sin; because our corrupt nature always inclines us to sin; because we commit small sins at least nearly every day. If I have committed but one mortal sin in my life, I have reason to think and say of myself, no matter how holy I may be, that I am the greatest sinner in the world, considering the great light and grace given to me, and the gifts bestowed on me so generously by God, in preference to so many others. If even the vilest wretch had the graces, lights, and impulses to good which I enjoy, he would serve God much more zealously than I do; and St. Augustine says we must look on all the sins from which God preserves us as if we had been forgiven them. Yet pious servants of God, who humbly acknowledged that truth, must still have been greatly rejoiced that they repented of and were forgiven their former sins; nor is there any doubt that they thanked, with joyful and loving hearts, the divine Mercy, which bore with them so patiently, and did not permit them to die and be lost in the miserable state of sin, freeing them in time from the slavery of the devil and bringing them to the liberty of the children of God. Although St. Paul acknowledges and professes himself to be the greatest sinner in the world; “Christ Jesus came into this world to save sinners, of whom I am the chief” (I. Tim. 1: 15); and again : “For I am not worthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the Church of God” (I. Cor. 15: 9); yet that consideration did not deprive him of the joy, peace, and glory resulting from his good conscience and from the services he rendered to God.

3. *In spite of all their good works the Saints thought they did little or nothing for God and heaven.* Quite true, and again quite right also; even St. Paul who rejoiced so much in his good conscience, says: “The sufferings of this time are not worthy to be compared with the glory to come, that shall be revealed in us” (Rom. 8: 18). All imaginable trials that can afflict us in this life are not worthy of being named even, when compared to the glory that God has promised us as a reward for them. But is that a reason for not rejoicing at the trials we bear? Rather the contrary. For instance: there is a magnificent property worth fifty thousand dollars; the owner of it gives it to you for one dollar because he has a liking for you; now if you are asked what you paid for that property, oh, you exclaim, the price is not worth mentioning; it has cost me only a dollar. Meanwhile you rejoice, and with good reason, at having gained possession of such a valuable property for so small a sum. So, too, should it be with us. There is not a doubt that all our efforts, even if we were to labor without intermission till the last day, are very small, worthless, nay, nothing, compared to the reward we have to expect for them. Our labor lasts a very short time; our reward in heaven will be eternal. And the same thought should make us rejoice during this life, and give us all the more courage in the divine service; namely, that God requires so little from us for his eternal heaven, for his everlasting rewards. Should I not rejoice when I think: I have done some good, only a little, it is true; but it is what God required of me; it is what he wished me to do in order to reward me eternally for it?

Therefore, the practice of sensible, pious, and holy people, instead of condemning, rather encourages the feeling of contentment, the consoling joy that we have in our good works, and in the service we have rendered our Lord and God. I say sensible people for I know well that there are some innocent souls who indeed live piously, but are always frightened and anxious, as if everything they do were bad. They fear sin where there is no sin. Why should I be afraid of a dog, when there is none in sight? Why should I be afraid of evil in that which my conscience cannot condemn as evil? If I wish to act sensibly, I should fear what is to be feared; but I should also praise and approve of what is good and praiseworthy.

My dear brethren, let us be sorry that we have ever offended the good God by the sins that our conscience tells us that we have been guilty of in the past; let us fear offending God in future by even one sin; and let us endeavor during the present time to love God with our whole hearts, and to do his holy will in all things. Beyond that there is nothing to cause us either fear or anxiety. If we do that we can be always peaceful, satisfied, and joyful, even because we serve the Lord. Oh, would that all men sought their joy and pleasure in the divine service! They would certainly find rest to their souls. Amen.

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