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JMJ

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 + + +

VOL. 5=THE CHRISTIAN'S LAST END

FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT

The Justice and Mercy of God in Condemning the Sinner

“Which of you shall convince me of sin”— St. John 8: 46.

If it is true that the mercy of God is infinite, that the works of His mercy exceed all His other works; if it is true that “His mercy endureth forever,” as David repeats twenty-seven times in the 115th psalm, how, then, can it be that God will thunder forth against the sinner for one mortal sin that terrible sentence to everlasting fire and to the torments of hell? Is not that unjust, nay, cruel? It is blasphemy to think and say this. “Which of you shall convince me of sin?” asks the Lord. True, it seems incomprehensible, and yet it is in reality right and just; it seems to contradict the infinite love and mercy of God, and yet even therein He shows His love and mercy, as I shall now prove in this sermon.

I. In sentencing the sinner to eternal fire, God shows His equity and justice towards the dead: how great must be the malice of sin.

II. He shows thereby His goodness and mercy, love and kindness towards the living.

I. Is it right for one sin to punish a poor mortal in such a terrible manner? For one sin that may have lasted but a moment to inflict an everlasting punishment in eternal fire? For a false oath, for instance, or a curse uttered in earnest from which a person derives no profit whatever? For a scandal given, although there may not have been the least intention of leading others into sin? Can it be right or just to punish such sins with eternal fire? Every law says that the chastisement should, as far as possible, be in proportion to the crime, and not be greater than the criminal deserves. Now, if the pleasure of the sin be so short-lived, how can the punishment be terribly and almost infinitely severe? If the sin is momentary, how can the punishment be eternal and incessant? If the sin is committed with the will alone, how can the punishment, and that, too, an eternal one, be inflicted on both soul and body? What proportion is there between a moment and eternity? Between such a wretched, short-lived pleasure and everlasting fire?

1. To represent in some degree to our weak understanding the justice of this sentence, I will tell you that it is a common saying that no injustice is done by acting toward a man according to His will. He who can choose between good and bad and deliberately selects the latter, cannot complain of being ill-treated; if he did so we might say to him: why did you not make a different choice? You were at liberty to do so. He who voluntarily and without compulsion takes up a heavy load cannot have the least right to say that people oppress him. It is no doubt very painful to burn in a fire; but if I willfully leap into it, or compel another to throw me in by violence, can I say that I am treated unjustly and cruelly? No; let the punishment be as severe as you wish, the man who undergoes it has no right to complain if he chooses it himself. Now, who is there to compel a man to go into that terrible fire of hell? Has not every one the free choice of making his eternal dwelling in heaven or in hell? God “hath set water and fire before thee:

stretch forth thy hand to which thou wilt. Before man is life and death, good and evil; that which he shall choose shall be given him.” You must either keep the commandments of God, and then heaven is yours: “If thou wilt keep the commandments they shall preserve thee” (Ecclus. 15: 17, 18, 16); or else, if you are not pleased to do that, hell is the place appointed for you. The reprobate man, before things came to such a pass with him, knew all this very well; why, then, did he choose hell? Who forced him to commit sin? No one but himself. So that he did not wish to be better off. And even if there is such a great difference between a momentary pleasure and eternal sorrow, is it not in your power and mine, oh, sinner! To enjoy the pleasure, or to reject it? Therefore you are indeed foolish and mad to purchase it at such a dear price; but God is and remains just in demanding the payment agreed on for it, and in chastising you with the rod that you knew well he had in readiness for your crime.

2. Again, the sinner forces the God of justice, and, so to say, compels Him by violence, to condemn him to hell. How so? God seeks and desires nothing more than that man, by keeping the commandments, should escape hell and be eternally happy in heaven; to that end He gives us so many warnings to be on our guard against the fire of hell, and He threatens us with that terrible punishment that fear may urge us to work out our salvation. And how long does He not wait for the sinner? How often does He not, as it were, beg and pray, and urge him to come back, promising to receive him again as His dear child? Is not that a clear proof that the good God does not wish the sinner to be lost? Now, if in spite of all this the sinner obstinately persists in wickedness, and continues to be the enemy of God; if he says, by his actions: I do not wish to be free from sin; I know that eternal fire is my doom; let it be so; let me go to hell; it is nothing to me; then is the Lord God, on account of His infinite holiness and justice, which do not allow Him to leave wickedness unpunished, compelled, as it were, to do what He is unwilling to do, and to condemn to hell that man whom He would willingly have had with Himself in heaven. Hence the man cannot complain of being unjustly treated, or say that his punishment is too great, for he himself has willfully chosen that punishment. Besides, on account of His infinite majesty, God has full power and authority to compel man, under pain of eternal punishment, to obey His law. We must look, not at the crime committed, but at the Person who is thereby insulted and offended. The malice of a mortal sin is in a certain sense infinite, because it is an offence against the infinite majesty of God, who is worthy of infinite honor, fear, and love. Now, if the punishment is to equal the guilt, mortal sin deserves infinite punishment, because its guilt is in a sense infinite, and if the sinner departs this life unrepentant and without being reconciled to God and atoning for his sins, he is justly condemned to suffer never-ending pains and torments.

3. This punishment is right and just, because with reason is the chastisement eternal, since the guilt can never be blotted out. You know what goes on in the workshop of the artist who is making a statue out of metal; while the furnace is glowing, the metal melting, and the tools all in readiness, he can make whatever statue he pleases—a man, an angel, a lion, a devil. But when the metal has been already poured out and has grown cold, can he then improve on or change the statue that has just been made? No; as it comes from the mould so it must remain. Christians, as long as we are in this life we are like the molten metal, and can become a likeness of God by grace, or a likeness of the devil by sin; when death comes the casting is over, and we retain the figure we receive therein, that is, in our last moment. If it is the diabolical figure of a reprobate sinner it cannot be changed any more, and the sinner is no longer in a state to do proper penance or to awaken a meritorious contrition for his sins. Nay, the reprobate are not only incapable of meritorious contrition and sorrow, but for all eternity they will retain obstinately and pertinaciously the wicked will in which they died. Although they know that God is their only happiness and is worthy of all love, they will hate and curse Him forever. From this again the conclusion is evident: since the malice of sin lasts forever, God must hate and punish it forever; and since the sinner, now obstinately persisting in his wickedness, does not cease to be wicked and to curse his Creator, neither can God cease to take vengeance on the sinner. Consequently it is and must be true that eternal fire is meet chastisement for even one mortal sin.

II. Now, when we consider the matter duly, we shall see that God has given us no clearer proof of His will to make us happy, no more powerful means to compel us, so to speak, to attain happiness, than the threat to punish us with eternal fire if we refuse to do his will, to fulfill his desire to have us in heaven. For when I hear a father saying to his son, with a friendly, smiling countenance: my dear child, be good, conduct yourself becomingly, and you shall remain with me always, and I shall leave you a hundred thousand dollars in my will; and threatening him, moreover, with a serious face, saying: but if you lead a bad, scandalous, reckless life, and bring shame and disgrace on yourself before the world, and reject the inheritance I offer you, be assured I will disinherit you completely—what should I think of that father? That he is a cruel, unmerciful man, who is altogether too severe with his children, and takes pleasure in their misfortunes?

So does God, our heavenly Father, act toward us, his adopted children. He offers an eternal inheritance of infinite goods, an eternal heaven filled with all imaginable joys, as the reward of our obedience and service, and that, too, a short service, that lasts only as long as this mortal, uncertain life of ours. See, He says to every one; take upon you My sweet yoke; remain faithful to Me only for a short time; love Me and keep My commandments; I will give you help and grace enough to do what I require of you; if you go wrong now and then, come back to Me and do penance; My sole desire is to make you happy in that way forever; even in this life you will have a most sweet consolation, and rest, and joy of conscience; hereafter you shall be where I am Myself as your eternal reward. But if you refuse Me that short service, if you abandon and insult Me, although I have given you no occasion to do so, and persist in your obstinacy till death, and thus prevent Me from fulfilling My desire to make you happy, then I will cast you into the lake of fire, in which you shall burn forever without hope of release. You must either go to heaven, where I wish you to be, or else suffer for eternity in hell.

Since God earnestly desires to make all men happy, He is compelled to threaten us with that grievous penalty; so that they who refuse to be led gently by love and the desire of a reward may at least be driven into heaven by violence through the fear of eternal punishment. And hence in this respect we owe the Almighty our sincerest thanks for His great goodness and mercy in thus menacing us with hell-fire, and compelling us to work out our salvation, to avoid evil, to strive after virtue, in order to be happy with Him forever in heaven. But even the threat of hell is not powerful enough to curb the madness and folly of most men; in spite of it they refuse to serve such a well meaning God; they will not allow him to drag them to heaven even by the fear of such a penalty. There is a hell and an eternal hell, and yet there are sinners who offend God! There is an eternal hell; Christians know it, and yet that hell is daily filled with Christians! How is it that such wretched creatures are to be found whose doom is already sealed? Who while I speak of them are actually immersed in those hellish flames? Is it possible that there are amongst us some whose lot will be to be buried in that hell fire? Ah, truly the majority of us should be there now if God had dealt with us according to our merits; and most men shall one day burn in hell forever, because, in spite of all warnings and threats, they recklessly persist in sinning.

Do you all believe in hell? What! You exclaim: We are good Christians and Catholics, who learn from our faith that the eternal fire of hell is an infallible truth. That I am well aware of; but still I ask the same question: do you all believe in this truth? It cannot be that you believe it. True, you all say with the lips, I believe. But you disprove your words by your actions. Those men and women live on without care or uneasiness in their old vices; they, too, say, I believe in an eternal hell. That dissolute man who does nothing but curse and swear at every one in the house, who spends in drinking what should go to the support of his wife and family, he believes in an eternal hell. That young man, that husband, who day and night seeks the gratification of his sensual desires, who is still in the proximate occasion of sin, persisting in an unlawful intimacy: he believes in an eternal hell. That young girl who keeps bad company, and is an occasion of unlawful desires to many by her extravagance in dress, thus placing a stumbling-block in their way: she believes in an eternal hell. Those people who consume the days and years of their lives in

idleness, seeking one amusement after another, and utterly ignoring and forgetting God: they believe in an eternal hell. Those people who sacrifice their souls for a wretched gain, or to gratify some evil passion or inclination: they believe in an eternal hell. Those sinners who go to confession, who never truly repent of their sins, nor amend their lives: they believe in a hell, in an eternal hell, in the everlasting fire of hell. But how is that possible? Why do you believe what God says if you do not fear what He threatens? Are you, then, able and willing to endure the terrible fire of hell for all eternity? No, they all answer; we have neither the power nor the will to do that. But the Son of God assures you that the life you are leading brings you straight to hell.

And why should you not believe it? Is it not an article of faith taught by the true Church, as well as all the other articles? It is as true as that we must all die. It is as true as that there is one God, and in that one God three Divine Persons. Have you, perhaps, lost all faith? Formerly, while you were still good and pious, you believed firmly that there is an eternal hell for impenitent sinners, because God has revealed it. Is there, then, in your opinion, no hell any more because you live wickedly? Because you have so often deserved the fire of hell? Because you wish to sin without fear of restraint? If we knew of hell only on the authority of some profane historian worthy of credit, who has handed down the tale to posterity; if it was only a tradition that there is an eternal hell; nay, if we had only some reasonable grounds to suspect the existence of such a place for the punishment of the impenitent sinner, even then every sensible man should shudder with fear and anguish at the bare thought of the possibility of his being hurled into such a terrible fire. Such a fearful evil, if it be true, should certainly act as a restraint on every one, and be an incentive to all to lead good lives for a short time, lest they be cast into that place of torments. But it is a truth revealed by God, who is infallible; a truth that all the faithful have up to this firmly believed; and you do not believe it? And you do not believe it, although you have deserved hell? Oh, woe! I repeat; woe to those who have to learn by experience what hell is before they believe in it! Amen.

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