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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!

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VOL. 4 - THE CHRISTIAN'S STATE OF LIFE

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

The Necessity of Hearing the Word of God in Sermons

“He was teaching daily in the temple.”— St. Luke 19: 47.

Christ taught daily in the temple of Jerusalem, and yet the Jews remained, as before, hardened in wickedness; so that when the Saviour looked on the city his eyes overflowed and he wept bitterly. If thou hadst only known on this day, when my teaching and instruction are not wanting to thee. Oh, if Christ, who holds the hearts and minds of all in his hands, could do no more than that with his teaching, how can I and other preachers complain that our words often produce so little fruit in the hearts of our hearers? Every Sunday and holyday we cry out, or rather Christ does so through us; how many Christians lead better lives on that account? What is the cause of that?

*Many do not come to the sermons;
Many do not come as they ought;
Others do not listen as they ought;
Others do not go away from it as they ought.*

I. He who is ignorant of something that he is bound to know, is under the necessity of learning and of being taught. In the ordinary course of nature, no one is born learned. We all bring ignorance as an effect of original sin with us into the world; it is cradled with us, and accompanies us for many years. Parents know by experience what trouble it costs them to bring up their children until the latter are able to take care of themselves. For this reason there are schools, colleges, and universities established to give instruction in all kinds of arts and sciences. Now, if learning and instruction are necessary for natural sciences and vain arts, how much more are they not necessary for the art of living and dying well, and in a Christian and holy manner? Are the former, perhaps, more important than the latter? We learn all other arts with the help of a teacher; is this of such little value that no teacher is required for it? And yet, this is the art of arts, the most important business that can engage our attention, on which our immortal soul and its eternal happiness depend; nay, it is the only business that must of necessity occupy us, the only art that we must be thoroughly acquainted with. I may not be able to speak Latin or other foreign languages, but I can go to heaven, all the same, with my native tongue; I could even go there if I were dumb and unable to speak. I have not practiced dancing, but that will not hinder my eternal happiness; there is no dancing in heaven. I may have no knowledge of law, but I can find my way to heaven. But, if I am ignorant of the one necessary science, that of leading a holy life, then all the others will not help me to save my soul. If I know and practice that science, no matter how inexperienced I am in all the others, then I am learned enough for the end of my creation.

But how many there are who are utterly ignorant of this holy art and science. The greater number of Christians, even those whom the world looks upon as wise, skilful, and learned, are only beginners in the

knowledge of what concerns their soul and their eternal happiness. They know very well how to live before the world, according to their station and position, but they are very ignorant as to how they are to live for heaven; they profess, indeed, to follow the law of the Gospel, but they know very little of its different obligations, and much less as to how they themselves should live as Christians. Therefore I have reason to compare such people to monomaniacs, who are mad only in a certain thing, while they can talk for half a day on different subjects without giving any sign of insanity; but as soon as that point is touched upon which is the cause and origin of their madness, then it is easy to see that they are not consistent, and that they have not the full use of reason. Ask him what does he know and think of God, whose infinite majesty is insulted by the least sin; the strictness of his justice, which punishes the sin of a moment by an eternity of fire; the irreparable loss caused by sin; the flight of dangerous occasions, so necessary to avoid sin; the sincerity of the sorrow that is necessary for the forgiveness of sin. Oh, what an idiot you will find him to be in all these things! He will speak and judge of them as the blind man does of color; these things are unknown to him, he does not understand them. Consider his mode of life, and compare it with the commandments and rules of our faith, and you will find one mistake after another, one error after another, one fall and one sin after another; as if all the things of the next life were nothing to him. And no wonder that he knows so little of them! How could it be otherwise? He never learned that science.

Our understanding is darkened and blinded in the things that concern God, and our soul and its salvation; and it would remain so if it were not enlightened supernaturally; so that we cannot even think anything good of ourselves (2 Cor. 3: 5). If one has at one time received this light, if he has known something, nay, even all about it, he has lost it all again; for it is another of our deplorable miseries that there is nothing so easily forgotten as the art and science of divine and heavenly things, unless one keeps them always before his mind, and constantly studies and practices them. Even if he still preserves some knowledge and remembrance of them, they are kept out of his mind, his attention is distracted from them by a thousand thoughts, undertakings, and cares. If he does not think of them, if his understanding is convinced of his obligation to regulate his life according to the sanctity of the Christian Law, his will still remains sluggish and inactive. Who can do all these things? he asks himself. Does he take counsel with his own nature and disposition? But that is corrupt and will lead him in quite a contrary direction. Does he ask and follow the advice of one like himself? Then it is one blind man leading another. Does he look to the customs and usages of the world for instruction? Alas! its false maxims are utterly opposed to Christ, and they are consequently lying and treacherous.

So that a man of this kind, of which there are countless individuals, if he wishes to attain eternal happiness, must go to some school in which he can learn how to live piously, or will at least be induced to do so. And what sort of a school is that?

One to which the Catholic Church calls her children on appointed days, and in which good Christians assemble to hear sermons and exhortations. They are public schools, and may be attended by all, great and small, rich and poor, master and servant, learned and ignorant, clergy and laity, men and women, without distinction. They are holy schools, in which only holy things and those that lead to holiness are treated of, namely—how we are to think, act, and labor as Christians. They are safe and certain schools, for the matter treated of in them is founded on the Word of God; the teacher who gives the instruction is the Eternal Wisdom, the infallible God himself. If you look only at the person who stands in the pulpit and speaks, you see only a poor mortal, who is subject to the same faults and mistakes as yourselves; who, like you, is inclined to evil, who can sin like you, and who is sometimes even a more impious and wicked sinner than all of you together; and who, therefore, has himself need of sermons, exhortations, and warnings. But do not forget the office he is entrusted with; in that you will find another teacher who cannot betray you. The apostle says, in the name of all Christian preachers: “For Christ, therefore, we are ambassadors, God, as it were, exhorting by us” (2 Cor. 5: 20). It is God who makes use of our tongues to frighten you away from sin, to exhort you to good, and to explain to you his will. The Lord himself says

to them: "He who heareth you, heareth me." "For it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaketh in you."

God could certainly instruct our ignorant understanding in good; he could spur on our sluggish will in his own Person, as he spoke in the Old Law to his Prophets; but, according to the present and ordinary arrangement of his Providence, he wills that men should be taught and instructed by men, and not otherwise. Thus we see that, although our Saviour appeared to Paul to convert him, yet he sent him to Ananias, who was to teach and instruct him in what he had to do and how he was to live. This means God now makes use of so generally that **St. Augustine says that he would be guilty of rashness who would seek to be enlightened without hearing sermons**. Could any one hope to excuse his own ignorance, and to free himself from all the sins he commits against the duties of his state of life; to excuse and exculpate himself from the neglect of so many good works that the Christian Law requires of him, when he seldom or never hears the Word of God preached? You will say that you did not know such a thing was a sin, that you did not think you were bound to perform such and such a good work; but you ought to, and you could have learned it.

II. The frequent hearing of sermons is very useful for the salvation of all Christians, no matter who they are. It is useful to those who are in the state of sin, and to those who are in the state of grace.

1. As far as sinners are concerned, they are compared to persons sleeping, according to the exhortation of St. Paul: "It is the hour for us now to rise from sleep" (Rom. 13: 11). He who is buried in the sleep of sin, who completely forgets his soul, and thinks of nothing but satisfying his unbridled desires. Sometimes a good thought knocks at his heart, to remind him that he is in a bad state; that the life he has been leading hitherto cannot end well; and yet he will not overcome himself to abandon his wicked ways. The light of the good example of the pious shines in his eyes, but it cannot make them open themselves to the necessity of amendment. His conscience warns him; it calls and cries out to him: What you are doing is not right! It is high time for you to awaken from your sleep and adopt another mode of life. Hereupon he begins to feel disturbed, to sigh and to moan, but falls back again into his former sleep. Then the God of mercy must go to him, and knock at his heart by the living voice of his preacher, in order to rouse him thoroughly and to exhort him, as the apostle does Timothy: "Preach the Word, be instant in season and out of season," whether it annoys or not, "reprove, entreat, rebuke in all patience and doctrine" (2 Tim. 4: 2). The preacher knocks, according to divine inspiration. Sometimes he frightens the sinner by the threat of an unhappy death, of a severe judgment, of the eternal fire of hell, unless he repents. Sometimes he promises him an everlasting reward and perfect happiness in heaven. Sometimes he makes him uneasy by describing the infinite majesty of God, who is offended by sin, and the terrible sentence of the divine justice. Or he encourages him by reminding him of the patience, mercy, and goodness of God, with which he is always prepared to receive the sinner. Sometimes he condemns the malice of past sins, or entices to good by portraying the beauty of virtue and the peace of mind that a just man enjoys. Sometimes he cries out: "Be reconciled to God," do penance, or you are lost; restore those ill-gotten goods, leave bad company, give up impurity, avoid the proximate occasion, or you are lost; forgive your enemy, make friends with him with whom you have hitherto lived in hatred and discord, correct that bad habit of swearing and cursing, or you are lost. Such warnings are the pointed arrows that strike sinners in a vital place and arouse them to penance. These are the last means that God himself uses to draw them to him. For, as he created all things by his Word; as he redeemed the world by his Incarnate Word; as he sanctifies men by the sacramental words; so he generally converts the sinner by no other means than his Word explained in sermons.

To this source are to be attributed the many wonderful conversions that have taken place at all times. David, enlightened as he was, did not enter into himself, or do penance, until he heard the accusing voice of the prophet Nathan. Josophat refused to abandon his ill-made alliance until Jehu upbraided him. Augustine was not converted by the acuteness of his understanding, nor by his daily studies, nor by the stings of conscience, but the truth shone on him through the sermons of St. Ambrose; he was overcome

and converted by them. Oh, sinner! whoever you are, do not let yourself be deceived and detained by the devil. Do not remain away from sermons, if you do not wish to persevere in that blindness that puts you in danger of eternal darkness. There is no use in looking for the divine light in any other way than that which God has established for the conversion of sinners, and that is the hearing his Word explained in sermons.

2. Sermons are also very useful for the just, in order to be strengthened and confirmed in justice. A white garment, no matter how beautiful and precious it is, can easily be soiled, it can soon lose its splendor and become soiled unless it is often cleaned; a house, no matter how strong and massive it is, may soon become shaky, if the parts that are injured by wind and weather are not repaired; a fire, no matter how clear it burns, will soon go out, unless you keep it supplied with fuel; a living body, no matter how healthy it is, must have food and nourishment at certain times, or it will soon die. Pious and just souls! what a precious, snow-white garment adorns you, since you are in the state of sanctifying grace! Yet you sometimes fall, through weakness, negligence, and ignorance, into a thousand faults and imperfections, which, although they do not make this garment black, yet stain it each time with spots that mar its beauty and make it less pleasing in the eyes of God. You are the house and dwelling-place of God; but to how many storms are you not exposed—that is, daily temptations, dangers, and occasions of sin? And if these are not constantly opposed, will not the building soon fall down? The Church, in which the Word of God is explained, is the armory from which you must supply yourselves with weapons, in order to conquer the enemy of your souls and to defend yourselves against every attack. Your souls are in a healthy state; the Word of God is their food and nourishment. If you neglect to give your souls this food, they will get wearied in the service of God, will grow cold and will die through want of strength.

There are many Christians nowadays, many even of those here present, to whom the words of Jeremias might be applied:

“The Word of the Lord is made a reproach to me, and a derision all the day.” For they who seldom or never hear a sermon during the month, or during six months, or even during the whole year, and some of them because they fear their secret wounds might be touched, or their consciences aroused, or their repose troubled, are afraid of being converted, and of being induced to lead better lives. Wretched and blind people! what other means have you of being enlightened as to your salvation? And yet you deliberately shun the light, like bats and owls! There are others who seldom or never come to a sermon because they think they are wise, learned, and experienced enough. I can read it for myself in books, they say; I have heard so many sermons already that there is no chance of my hearing anything new. Now, you should be more modest; do not be so very proud; granted that you are learned enough; I will believe it with all my heart; but is that a reason why you should not stand in need of the living, inspiring Word of God? His Spirit does not breathe everywhere and at all times, but “it breathes where it willeth,” and dispenses its graces. You can hear nothing that you have not heard already. Be it so; but I tell you, confidently, that you will hear many truths that you have not yet perhaps put in practice. You can read them in spiritual books, and perhaps in a better style than you would hear in sermons; that may be true also, but it is one thing to read and another to hear, and it is to this latter that God has, generally speaking, given the power of moving hearts and bestowing the grace of the Holy Ghost. The rain, falling from the clouds, gives quite a different refreshment to the earth, to that which it would receive from artificial irrigation; and in the same way the word that God speaks to your heart, by the mouth of his servant, is much better able to produce fruit in your soul than the thoughts which your own cleverness and ingenuity suggest to you. “Woe to you that are wise in your own eyes” (Is. 5: 21), and do not see the deceits by which the devil tries to keep you away from the Holy Ghost!

Finally, there are others who come now and then, when the whim takes them, but not regularly. As if God were obliged to store up the light of his grace, and keep it in reserve for them, until it may happen to suit their convenience to come for it, and even then, too, it would be necessary that the subject treated of be one that is suited to the state of their souls. All sermons cannot treat of all subjects, nor can all be equally profitable to every one; it may be that there is only one sermon to which God, in his wise decrees,

has attached your conversion and the sanctity of your life, and your eternal salvation; and if you willfully neglect that opportunity, you will never, perhaps, have a similar one again. But, you think, if I miss the sermon I will be told at home afterwards what it was about. That is good, and it is a work of Christian charity; but it is a different thing to hear a sermon second-hand and to hear it yourself: the words that the preacher spoke may be repeated to you, but not the inspirations which God sends to the heart. To say the very least, such carelessness is a sign of a very indifferent appetite, of a very weak desire to hear the Word of God. If we had to do without food for a whole day, either through want, because there is no bread in the house, or because we are compelled to abstain from all nourishment, we should think it a very hard thing; and yet there are many who, through indifference, deprive their souls of nourishment on Sundays and holydays, and they think nothing of it! What wonder is it that they should continue in their sins, or in their tepidity, or in their ignorance?

Oh, what a strict account will not many Catholics have to give because they neglected so many and such frequent opportunities of being exhorted to good! That we shall see on the day when the Lord will show each one how well and how wisely he acted with regard to all of us; when he will show each one the great graces he had in readiness to bestow on him, if he had heard the exhortations, not of the priest, but which God himself uttered by the mouth of the priest. Poor, unfortunate souls who seldom or never hear a sermon, although they could do so easily enough! They bear about them one of the certain signs of reprobation. since they have no taste for spiritual food. The Infallible Truth has said: “He who is of God, heareth the Word of God;” “therefore you do not hear because you are not of God.” But if you are not of God, and have no part in him, of whom are you? Of the devil; a misfortune which God may avert from us all.

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