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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. I = THE BAD CHRISTIAN*

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Superstition: Its Varieties and Its Malice.

*“There shall be signs in the sun, and in the moon, and in the stars.”* Luke 21:25.

What are these signs in the heavens which shall cause men one day to wither away with fear? “The sun shall be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven.” And what meaning shall these terrible signs convey to men? That the last day of the world is upon them, and that the Son of Man is about to judge the living and the dead. “And they shall see the Son of Man coming in the clouds of heaven.” But what connection is there between these signs and the end of the world, or the general judgment? When the sun was darkened long ago in Egypt, and again at the death of our Lord, nothing of the kind was portended. The moon and the stars often undergo various changes without any special significance being attached to it. While it is true that certain disturbances of the heavenly bodies have no power of themselves to betoken certain effects, yet divine revelation assures us that those changes of the planets which it foretells shall be a certain sign of the second coming of Christ. Hence, we must believe in those signs; and when men behold them, they shall have just cause to tremble with fear. Far different is it with those superstitious signs and practices which have become widely prevalent in our day, with those vain and foolish observations and divinations, and all the ridiculous efforts of modern soothsayers to produce certain effects by means that are utterly inadequate. Oh, who will give me arms to combat these worse than follies of so many silly or ignorant people!

*Let me now explain to you the varieties of this form of superstition, and the nature of its sin.*

Countless are the superstitious practices now in vogue in nearly every land under the sun, each nation having its special abuses of this sort, as it has its particular language, dress, and manners. St. Augustine says of the converted Christians of his time, who still retained some relics of paganism: If two friends are walking together, and a stone falls, or a child, or a dog runs between them, they regard it as a sure sign that their friendship will soon be broken. If one sneezes when putting on his shoes in the morning, it is taken as a sign of an unlucky day, and he goes to bed again. He who stumbles on the threshold of the door going out, must go back at once, or else some misfortune will befall him. If a black dog runs into the house, it is a sign that some one in that house will soon die. If the salt-cellar is upset at table, something dreadful is sure to happen. These, and countless similar vain and foolish observations, continues St. Augustine, are in vogue, and they are all sins of superstition, inventions of the devil, and relics of old heathenism and idolatry.

Are not the same vain observations prevalent among Christians nowadays? For instance, some people imagine that certain herbs have more virtue when plucked at night, at a certain hour, or on a certain feast. Others are afraid to undertake a journey on a certain day, or begin an important enterprise, say, on a Friday, under the impression that it would be unlucky to do so. From eggs laid on Holy Thursday (declare some of these

simpletons) come forth fowl that change their color every year. Divide an onion (says another) into twelve parts on Christmas night, exactly on the stroke of twelve; place a pinch of salt on each part, giving it at the same time the name of one of the months of the year: according as the salt melts or remains dry, it may be seen what months in the coming year will be dry or rainy. If you have a burning or a noise in your right ear, it is a sign that some dear friend is speaking or thinking of you; if in the left ear, it is a sign that some one is speaking ill of you. If thirteen sit down to table together, one of the company will die before the end of the year.

What foolish nonsense is all this! What connection can there possibly be between such signs, and the effects that are expected to follow them? For instance, if thirteen sit down to dinner, why should one of the guests die during the year? Why should not the same thing happen to thirteen horses or oxen that eat together in the same stable? Why not to thirteen Religious who live and eat together in the same convent the whole year round? It is all sheer nonsense. The advent of death is not brought about by any such combinations of numbers. It comes, as Christ tells us, when we least expect it. Hence, he warns us to be ready at all times to die.

There were once thirteen canons of a cathedral who resolved to show how groundless was this superstition of unlucky numbers. They resolved to sit down to table in spite of it, and enjoy themselves together. But one of them did not like to take the risks. "You are too daring," he said to the others; "if thirteen sit down together at table one is sure to die during the year. I will have nothing to do with it. You may do as you like, but I will stay at home!"

But, as it happened, the only one of the number who died during the year was the man who remained at home. Suppose, now, that he had been persuaded to join the others; would not his death have confirmed the old superstition? "He that feareth the Lord shall tremble at nothing, and shall not be afraid, for he is his hope," says the Holy Ghost; and "he who loves God," says St. Augustine, "will fear nothing in the world so much as to offend God by sin."

Again, there is the sinful folly of believing in dreams. For instance, if you dream that you have lost a tooth, the dream-reader will tell you that some one of your friends will soon die. If you dream of a fish, you are told that this also is a sign of death. The wise man speaks against these superstitious observations and calls them fancies of ignorant and foolish men:

"The hopes of a man that is void of understanding are vain and deceitful; and dreams lift up fools. The man that gives heed to lying visions is like him that catcheth at a shadow, and followeth after the wind." And, again: "Deceitful divinations and lying omens, and the dreams of evildoers, are vanity... Set not thy heart upon them, for dreams have deceived many, and they have failed who put their trust in them."

In the Old Law God expressly forbade believing in false dreams: "You shall not divine, nor observe dreams." But, it might be objected, there are many passages in the Sacred Scripture which show that the future is foretold in dreams that actually came true. Thus, Joseph of Egypt dreamt in his youth of his future exaltation, Pharaoh dreamt of the seven years of plenty and the seven years of famine; Nabuchedonosor saw in his dream a tall tree, which prefigured the punishment of his sins, and in his dream of a statue, the succession of the four great monarchies; one of the Madianite soldiers prophesied Gideon's victory from a dream he had, and so on with many similar instances. Does it not follow, then, that there is often reason for believing in dreams, and what they portend really happens? To this I answer in the words of the Wise Man. After saying, "Set not thy heart upon them," he adds: "Except it be a vision sent forth from the Most High" that is, unless God, for some important purpose, chooses to reveal something in a dream. All those dreams in the Holy Scripture that I have mentioned were in reality so many revelations from on high, and, as such, deserved to be believed in. It happens occasionally, too, in our own days, that God terrifies the sinner in a dream, so that he may be inclined to immediate repentance. There is no doubt also that certain people have been privileged to see their dreams realized; but, ordinarily speaking, dreams are mere fancies, the result of disordered digestion, imaginary images pictured on the brain during sleep, which it would be a most superstitious and sinful folly to believe in.

Another foolish superstition is that which concerns the hour of one's birth. He who is born in a certain month, at a certain hour, under a certain constellation, will be happy all his life, while he who is born in a different month, at a different hour, will be unhappy. Now, what connection is there between these things? And yet there are people who believe so firmly in this nonsense that they allow it to miserably influence or even to shorten their very lives. A certain man, when on his deathbed, could not be induced to make his confession, because he believed, according to the chart of his nativity, that he had still a long time to live. Death, however, proved the

prophecy to be a false one, for it came at once, and hurried his soul into eternity, and very probably into hell. A married woman once happened to read in a book on astrology belonging to her husband (which she had taken up through curiosity), that if a woman who was born on a certain day were to get married, she should die in child-bed. This made her so nervous that, although she had given birth to all her children without difficulty, she died during her next pregnancy through the effects of an over-excited imagination.

Such are some of the lamentable results of foolish superstitions.

But yet, it may be said, if it is superstitious to observe signs and constellations, then it is superstitious also for gardeners to consult the moon in sowing and planting, in cutting and pruning their trees. Superstitious also are those almanac-makers and weather prophets who foretell that it will be hot or cold, wet or dry on certain days. Ah, that is altogether a different thing! Science assures us that the sun, the stars, and especially the moon, have received from their Creator a certain influence on earth, air and water and their products, and that they exercise that influence in a greater or less degree, according as they change their positions with regard to our elements. Therefore these observations of gardeners and weather prophets are not always superstitious, but are based on natural properties of bodies, and are warranted by experience, although they are not always to be implicitly relied upon.

Thirdly, superstition is practiced by using certain means to discover hidden treasure. The best known of these is the divining rod. It is made of hazel wood, and, if carried about in the hand, is said to bend down of its own accord when it comes to a place in which there is water, gold, silver, or other metal hidden in the earth. The use of this rod is not superstitious, provided that no superstitious words or signs accompany its use, since the effect it produces seems to be within the limit of natural powers, and might be ascribed to some vapors ascending from the water or metal, which have a special sympathy for the hazel rod, just as the magnet attracts iron. Now, it is the general opinion of the learned that we must not ascribe to the devil an effect that can easily be attributed to the forces of nature, although we cannot exactly say how these forces operate. But if, when these rods are being cut, or used, certain words are pronounced, or circumstances are observed which have no natural power to help in producing the effect desired, there is no doubt that the whole business is tainted with superstition.

Are those observations and practices grievous sins? There is no doubt of it, unless in the case of inculpable ignorance. What sort of sins are they? Those who consult false prophets to get advice from them, and to be cured of their diseases, are guilty of asking help from the devil, and there is no doubt that they commit a grievous sin. The same is to be said of all other superstitious practices, because by them a secret contract is entered into with the devil, the sworn enemy of God and man. This is clear; for, since those observations, signs and usages have no power of themselves, or from God or from the Church, to produce the effects intended, they must necessarily produce them by the aid of the devil, who makes use of them as a means of deceiving souls.

But some one will say: How can there be a compact with the devil, since when I have recourse to these things I do not desire any help from him? Truly you may not exactly ask the devil to help you in such practices, but you do so implicitly and by your acts.

Two people go to take a walk out of town in a certain land. On the way they become thirsty; "Oh," they say, "what a pity we have not something to drink!"

A little further on they see a house with a garland of ivy or a green bush hanging outside the door. "Now," they say, "we are all right; we can get wine here." How do they know that? How can a garland of ivy teach one that wine is to be had in that house? Certainly the garland has not that power of itself; but, since it has been once for all agreed upon that such a thing outside the door is a sign that wine can be had within, I know at once when I see it what it means. It is the same with superstitious practices. The devil made the agreement once for all with those who first began these practices: These things shall reveal my agency and power. Thus, for instance, he arranged: "Whosoever shall say such and such words, or do this or that in certain circumstances, shall be looked upon by me as desiring my help." As soon, therefore, as these words are spoken or those actions performed, the devil comes at once, as if at a given signal. Hence, when I knowingly have recourse to such practices, it is the same as if I said: I know that whoever does this will be helped by the devil; I do it now in order to get help from him, too." It is in *this* that the malice of superstition consists. This is the reason why Satan, who always grudges the Almighty the honor shown him, and tries to deprive him of it whenever he can, has introduced into the world so many different superstitious customs, and has taken such pains to keep them alive amongst the ignorant. In that way he succeeds in depriving God of the adoration due to him; he gradually lessens men's

confidence in God, and leads them on imperceptibly, even by means of hypocritical piety, to commit other sins, to live in the state of sin, and to die impenitent.

In conclusion, let us all profit by the warning that St. Paul addresses to the Galatians regarding vain observations of certain times and days: “But now, after that you have known God, or, rather, are known by God: how turn you again the weak and needy elements, which you desire to serve again. You observe days, and months, and times, and years. I am afraid of you, lest perhaps I have labored in vain for you.”

In the same way should each one of you think. God has called me by his admirable light to the one true Church, in which I must place confidence, and adore and love a God of infinite power, goodness, and wisdom. I have been born of Catholic parents: shall I, then, be so superstitious, so foolish, so wicked, as to occupy myself with such nonsensical practices, and make common cause with the devil? No, I protest against it. Far from me be all superstition! I wish to serve God and to adore him alone, not with lies and follies, but in spirit and in truth, that I may one day adore him in that place where faith shall have an end, and I shall see him face to face. Amen.

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