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JMJ

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

SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

An Easy and Luxurious Life

“What went you out to see? A man clothed in soft garments?” Matt. 9:8.

St. John Baptist, the holy precursor of Christ, is not a soft-living or effeminate man. Behold him, clad in a rough camel-skin, his body emaciated by constant fasting, as he goes about preaching the necessity of penance. Why all these evidences of a life of severe mortification? Was not the Baptist sanctified in his mother's womb? Was it not he whom Christ called an angel on account of his innocence? Never in his whole life did he commit the least sin, yet see how he puts our weakness and delicacy to shame: We have sinned often and grievously; nevertheless, we shun the least discomfort, and gratify our senses on every occasion. Can we in that way, gain heaven with St. John? No, Christians: “From the days of John the Baptist until now,” says our Lord, “the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent bear it away,” and today, I undertake to prove that an easy and luxurious life is not the way to heaven,

I. Because it is either a sinful life, or one which is full of the danger of sin; and

II. Because it is not a Christian life.

By a luxurious life I mean a constant seeking after bodily comforts and sensual gratifications; a perpetual flight and avoidance of all that can cause pain to the body, or displease the outward senses, or contradict the natural inclinations. In this way, everything that is delicious is given to the mouth, the eyes are allowed to look at all that is pleasing, the ears to hear what is delightful, the taste to enjoy what is sweet, the body, to feel what is soft and comforting; while, on the other hand, if any of those things be wanting, if the natural will or inclination be contradicted, then there arises a feeling of vexation, annoyance, and discomfort, which makes one impatient, displeased, and discontented. The greater part of such a one's time is spent in eating, drinking, sleeping, dressing, visiting, and amusements; in a word, the votary of luxury is always seeking for pleasures and distractions, although the latter may not in themselves be unlawful. This is the life against which St. Paul warned the Christians of Rome: “Make not provision for the flesh in its concupiscences” (Rom. 13:14). Mark the words, “in its concupiscences,” as if he wished to say: You must not even have a desire for the delights of the flesh. And yet, what a vast number there are now in the world, who thus make provision for the flesh!

Now, I say that a luxurious life of this kind is not the way to heaven, firstly, because it is either a sinful one, or, at all events, is exposed to the danger of sin. Otherwise, we discredit the teachings of the holy Fathers of the Church and doubt those of the Holy Scripture itself. St. Paul, in briefly detailing the vices most prevalent in the world, indicates inordinate self-love as their first and only cause, “Men shall be *lovers of themselves*,” he writes to his disciple Timothy. There is the root, and what other evils spring from it? They shall be: “Covetous, haughty, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, wicked, without affection, without peace,

slanderers, incontinent, unmerciful, without kindness, traitors, stubborn, puffed up, and lovers of pleasure more than of God: having an appearance, indeed, of godliness, but denying the power thereof... men corrupted in mind, reprobate concerning the faith, etc.” (Tim. 3:2, 3, 4, 5, 8).

But you may ask, is it, then, a sin to love one’s self, to seek one’s bodily comfort, and to gratify one’s senses? And I am obliged to answer you: No, it is not a sin; but it is, generally speaking, the door to a whole catalogue of sins, nay, to an almost constant state of sin. Every pleasure, considered in itself may be lawful and becoming; but to seek and desire one pleasure after the other, and to be inordinately addicted to sensual delights, cannot be anything else but a vicious life. “The wisdom of the flesh is death,” says St. Paul; “The wisdom of the flesh, is an enemy to God: for it is not subject to the law of God; neither can it be. And they who are in the flesh, cannot please God” (Rom. 8:6, 8). Can one be sinless while the soul is in such a dangerous condition? Can one love God and please him when one is his sworn enemy? What a bitter curse is uttered against voluptuaries in the Gospel of St. Luke! “Woe to you that are rich, for you have your consolation...Woe to you that are filled...Woe to you that now laugh” (Luke 6:24, 25) and have an easy life of it. Who speaks thus, my dear brethren? Jesus Christ himself, our Saviour, who is otherwise so good and gentle. Who can doubt what he says? Amongst all created things, sin alone, or the state of sin, can be the object of the divine malediction; so that, this easy, luxurious life, which Christ threatens with such grievous woes, cannot be an innocent life or one free from all sin. On the contrary if you reflect but for a moment on its nature, qualities, and effects, you will see that it cannot but be vicious, or the occasion of many vices. If full liberty is given to the eyes, ears, tongue, and the other senses; if they are not often restrained by self-denial, must they not frequently meet with objects that are unlawful and dangerous to the soul? What is therefore, more necessary in this respect, than constant, daily mortification, of which those fastidious people do not wish to know anything? What a powerful influence have not the corrupt inclinations and desires of the flesh over the unreasoning will, always impelling and, as it were, dragging us violently to evil! If we do not bravely resist them, can we remain long free from sin? But we cannot resist them without doing violence to ourselves in many things, combating our evil desires, and practicing mortification constantly.

No matter how innocent pleasures seem to be in the beginning, if one becomes inordinately attached to them, and gives himself up unrestrainedly to them, they take from him all relish for heavenly things. The precious time given him for the sole purpose of attending to the business of his salvation is, generally speaking, frittered away; he has no desire for prayer, fasting, or visiting the church; the duties of his state of life are neglected on account of the difficulties that attend their performance; he seldom hears the word of God in sermons, if the hour appointed for the sermon be too early, or the weather too cold; and meanwhile, for weeks and months, he neither hears, reads, or thinks of anything that could encourage him in the service of God. With regard to the fasting prescribed by the Church, since it is contrary to his bodily comfort, he finds all sorts of pretexts to dispense himself from it. The mind becomes indisposed for good works, the understanding darkened, the reason perverted, if the thoughts and faculties of the man are directed like the dumb brutes, to his mere temporal wants, and he whose desires should be in heaven, his future country, is no longer capable of any other knowledge than that of which St. James says that it is brutish and diabolical: “This is not wisdom descending from above, but earthly, sensual, devilish” (Jas. 3:15). He becomes the slave of his own body, to which he devotes all his cares and anxieties by day and by night; nay, he sacrifices to it his whole life, thus placing his last end in those pleasures and enjoyments which, used in due order and moderation, should serve as a means of preserving his health in order the better to do the will of God and attend to his soul’s welfare. When the patriarch Noe sent out the raven from the ark, why did it not return? Would it not have been well off in the ark? Yes, but it saw the carrion floating about, that was its ordinary food, and it fell upon it at once, and left Noe, who had hitherto cared for it. Even so is it, at last, with those slaves of their bodies. Once they have acquired a taste for earthly things, they think no more of God, they forget the future life, and would not set much store by the happiness of heaven, if they could be sure of enjoying themselves forever here on earth. “The heaven of heaven is the Lord’s,” they would say; “but the earth he hath given to the children of men” (Ps. 113:16).

See how dangerous and sinful an easy and luxurious life is! It is that broad and spacious way of which our Lord speaks with moaning and lamentation: “Wide is the gate, and broad is the way that leadeth,” not to heaven, but “to destruction;” and, alas, “many there are who go in thereat” (Matt. 7:13). A luxurious life is not only a life tending to sin, but

II. *It is not a Christian life.*

No Christian can go to heaven who does not lead a true Christian life. Now, the heaven that we have to expect is not different from that which the first Christians worked for: "From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent bear it away" (Matt. 11:52). There is no other way but the old one which leadeth to this heaven: "How narrow is the gate, and strait is the way that leadeth to life; and few there are that find it!" (Ibid. 7:14.) Jesus Christ still says to us, as he said to his followers of the first century: "Strive to enter by the narrow gate, for many, I say to you, shall seek to enter and shall not be able" (Luke 13:24). In holy Baptism, my brethren, we all took a solemn and public oath, to renounce the world and its pomps and vanities; the devil and his works; the flesh and its desires. Therefore Tertullian calls Christians, "Religious of the Cross;" and St. Paul says that baptism is a crucifixion, a death and burial of man. "For we are buried together with him by baptism unto death" (Rom. 6:4), he writes to the Romans; so that we must henceforth live for Christ alone, and die to all the desires of corrupt nature, to the flesh and its sensualities. "Knowing this, that our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin may be destroyed, to the end that we may serve sin no longer... Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, so as to obey the lusts thereof" (Ibid. 6:12). Now, O luxurious man, how can you keep this baptismal promise and vow, if you always treat your body so delicately, seek its comfort in all things, gratify all its desires, and avoid crosses and discomforts as long as you can? No, in the life you lead, you are a perjured, unfaithful, unjust renegade, who have only the name of a Christian.

Further, what is a Christian? Do you think, perhaps, that the few drops of water that were poured on your head in Baptism alone suffice to make you one? No doubt, they are necessary, but they are not sufficient. What, then, is a true Christian? He is a man, says St. Bernard, whose chief and greatest business it is to follow Christ, to take him as his Model, and to regulate his life according to that of Christ. "In vain," says he: "in vain, am I a Christian, if I do not follow Christ." "God became man," says St. John Chrysostom, "that man might become, as it were, God; he made himself like to us, not merely to redeem us, but that we might lead a life like to his. 'For I have given you an example,' he says himself, by way of exhortation to all men, 'that as I have done to you, so you do also'" (John 3:15). In a word, it is an undoubted fact that we must become conformable to the image of the Son of God, if we wish to be amongst the number of those whom God has elected to eternal life, as St. Paul expressly says. Now, O voluptuary, compare your effeminate life with that of Jesus Christ, and behold the startling contrast! Christ, poor and stripped of all earthly things; you with your heart buried in the perishable goods of earth. Christ, torn in every part of his body with scourges; you, in such comfort that the prick of a needle is intolerable to you. You will not hear of overcoming yourself unless there is question of gratifying your sensuality. Christ, a man of sorrows; you, a child of joys. Christ, under the cross, and on the cross even to death, while you dream of nothing but pleasures, and cannot bear even the name of adversity. Could two more inharmonious things be well brought together, than the life of Christ and yours? Oh, what a dangerous sign of eternal reprobation is this! When, on your death-bed, they will place the crucifix in your hands, will it be a source of consolation, think you, or not, rather, a presage of your eternal damnation? The death of Christ is of no use to you, unless you endeavor to make your life resemble his. "And they that are Christ's have crucified their flesh with the vices and concupiscences" (Gal. 5:24).

Finally, even if you had not renounced in Baptism the flesh and its concupiscences; even if Christ was not proposed to you as your Model; would you not still be obliged, as a Christian, to obey the Christian law? What is that law? Read the New Testament, and you will find that it inculcates nothing more frequently than self denial, mortification, and the crucifying of one's self. For the sake of brevity, I will quote but a few passages from the lips of Christ himself: "Whosoever doth not carry his cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:27). "He that loveth his life shall lose it; and he that hateth his life in this world, keepeth it unto life eternal. If any man minister to me, let him follow me" (John. 12:25, 26). The Epistles of St. Paul are full of exhortations to the effect that the goods of this world must be enjoyed, even by those who possess them in abundance, with a constant moderation and spirit of detachment: "It remaineth," he writes to the Corinthians, "that they also who have wives be as if they had none... and they that rejoice, as if they rejoiced not and they that buy, as though they possessed not; and they that use this world, as if they used it not" (1 Cor. 7:29, 35). Do you think that this is, perhaps, but an exhortation to a work of supererogation, and not a positive command? How can that be? Are we not commanded to follow Christ, in order to enter heaven with him? And we cannot

follow him without bearing daily crosses, trials, and mortifications. If there is no command to deny one's self in this life, why does our Lord threaten with the loss of their souls those who neglect doing so? If we are not commanded to lead mortified lives, why does St. Paul exclude the effeminate from the kingdom of God? "Nor the effeminate shalt possess the kingdom of God" (1 Cor. 6:10).

Most dangerous, then, not to say unhappy, is the state of those who live in abundance of all temporal goods, who have everything they desire, and use all they have for their bodily comfort and for the gratification of their senses. They have just reason for fearing that they are of the number of those whom Christ threatens with woe, because they have their consolation here; of those who tread that broad and pleasant way that leads to destruction and eternal ruin. They have reason to fear that, one day, will be spoken of them the words of the Apocalypse: "As much as she hath glorified herself and lived in delicacies, so much torment and sorrow give ye to her" (Apoc. 18:7), unless they begin at once to practice mortification of the body and its senses.

Rejoice, on the other hand, you poor and needy mortals, who suffer want in many things, who have to labor hard for your daily bread, whose flesh is tamed by weakness and illness, by trials and troubles of all kinds, be comforted, and rejoice, that the good God has removed from you the occasion of leading an easy, luxurious, and dangerous life. He himself inflicts on you the penance you might otherwise shrink from inflicting on yourselves; for if you bear your daily trials, troubles, and annoyances with a good intention for God's sake, you will have mortifications enough. Do not envy those who enjoy prosperity in this world, but rather condole with them. Nevertheless, we must not give way to rash judgments against our neighbor. We cannot see everything, and therefore we are often deceived by outward appearances. Many a one seems to us to lead an easy, indolent life, who has in reality an abundance of hidden trials and crosses to bear, or else he may secretly afflict himself by voluntary mortifications. The silken garment sometimes conceals the rough hair-shirt. Even at a well-furnished table, the taste is often severely mortified by being deprived of some favorite article of food. While the laugh is on the lips, the heart is frequently devoured with anguish. Still, generally speaking, I say of those who really lead an easy, luxurious life, (no matter who they are); do not envy them, but rather condole with them; do not grudge them the happiness they appear to enjoy, but, rather, have the greatest pity for them; for like unreasoning beasts they are hastening, even while feasting, to the slaughter-house. You, indeed, now weep, while they laugh; you suffer hunger and thirst, while they abound in everything; you are plagued with severe labor, while they lead idle, sensual lives; but be content with what God has ordained for you. The time will come when you will laugh, and they will weep; when you will be filled, and they will suffer hunger and thirst like dogs; when you will rejoice in endless peace and delights, while they will be eternally tormented.

The rich glutton was clothed in purple and fine linen, and feasted sumptuously every day (Luke 16:19), while poor Lazarus had to suffer the pangs of hunger: "Who lay at his gate full of sores, desiring to be filled with the crumbs that fell from the rich man's table, and no one did give him" (Luke 16:20, 21). But how different it was with them at the end! When the rich man was fattened up, the butcher, Death, came: "The rich man also died, and he was buried in hell" (Ibid. 22). And what became of Lazarus? "It came to pass that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom" (Ibid.). Why was the rich man condemned to suffer in hell? "Son," answered Abraham, "remember that thou didst receive good things in thy lifetime" (Ibid. 25). Why was Lazarus brought into the joys of heaven "and likewise Lazarus evil things; but now he is comforted, and thou art tormented" (Ibid.). Is that the end of an easy, luxurious life, and of a mortified, penitential one? Oh, if such be the case, I do not wish to enjoy pleasures! In future, I shall be content with my state, and will leave abundance to those who wish to have it. Let others eat, drink, and sleep well; let them pamper their bodies, and laugh, and enjoy themselves. My desire is to chastise my flesh, and give it up to mortification and self denial, so that I may save my soul forever; for I cannot have two heavens, one here, and another hereafter. If, therefore, I have now to sigh, with the afflicted Job on the dung-hill: "The flesh being consumed, my bone hath cleaved to my skin" (Job 19:20), I will also console myself with the same Job, saying, "I shall be clothed again with my skin, and in my flesh I shall see my God: this my hope is laid up in my bosom" (Ibid. 26:27). In this flesh of mine, which is now mortified and afflicted; in this flesh, which is now emaciated by daily labor; in this flesh, which is now often tormented by hunger and thirst, want and poverty; in this flesh, which is now worn out by illness and weakness, and tried by all kinds of contradictions, in this flesh I shall see my God, and taste an everlasting comfort and pleasure! Amen.

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