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Remember that Christmas Eve is a day of FAST and complete ABSTINENCE.

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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*

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Superstition in Sacred Things

*“A voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare ye the way of the Lord; make straight his paths.” St Luke 3:4.*

Who is it that was crying in the wilderness: “Make straight the paths of the Lord”? St. John Baptist, who was a prophet; not one of those false prophets, ravenous wolves in sheep’s clothing, who, by their diabolical advice and help, bring souls to destruction, but a true prophet called to office by God, to instruct the people. What did he teach? “Prepare ye the way of the Lord; make straight his paths.” The path of the Lord must not be crooked, or uneven; you must keep the commandments of God, and adore Him in spirit and in truth. Hence, the Gospel excludes all superstition, which prepares the way for the devil, and not for God. Prayer, divine service, and other manifestly good works are all holy things, that should serve to ‘prepare the way of the Lord, yet even these are often used superstitiously by the pious through ignorance, by the wicked through malice. Hence I will explain to you, today.

- I. How superstition may be committed through prayers, devotions and holy things; and
- II. How to discern when a devotion is superstitious.

It is an old saying that where God has a church, the devil builds a chapel. He leaves no stone unturned in his efforts to preserve amongst Christians, and to spread throughout the world, some relics of ancient idolatry. But he is not always successful with pious and fairly-instructed Christians, who put no faith in vain observations and superstitious practices. He therefore hides his wickedness under a very specious cloak; that is, he tries to deceive the faithful by an appearance of holiness, to lead them on to the vice of superstition by certain devotions and holy things, nay, even by the very sign of the cross, which is so often used to put him to flight. Since he cannot prevent the true God from being adored, he endeavors at least to prevent men from honoring and adoring as he wishes.

It is well for Christians to know that there exists what is called superfluous worship, a false devotion, which is not ordained by God nor approved of by the Church, nor in accordance with her general customs. One of the chief features of this delusion is the attributing to certain prayers and works of piety a power and efficacy which they have not in themselves, and have not received from God or from his Church. Let me give you an example of this: A certain noble lady, whose only and dearly loved little son was sick, came to a priest for consolation and advice in her affliction. “Father,” she said, “a certain pious person, who has received special lights from God, has told me of a very efficacious form of devotion, by which I shall certainly be able to secure the

recovery of my child; but, influenced probably by humility and a desire of concealing the divine favors, the person charged me strictly not to say a word of this to any one.” “What is the devotion?” asked the priest. “I must have a Mass said,” answered the lady, “in honor of the Blessed Trinity.” “Very good, indeed,” rejoined the priest; “the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is of infinite value, and devotion to the Blessed Trinity is infinitely good and powerful. It would be a very good thing to have the Mass said. But why make such a secret of it?” “Oh,” returned the lady, “because this Mass is to be said under very special circumstances and conditions. In the Blessed Trinity we adore one God in three distinct Persons; now, three and one written in succession make thirty-one; therefore the priest that says the Mass must be exactly thirty-one years old. Again, one and three written in succession make thirteen, therefore the Mass-server must be exactly thirteen years old.” “Very good; is that all?” “No,” she continued; “there must be three candles on the altar, and the Mass must begin exactly at nine o’clock, because three times three are nine. Thus, the priest, the Mass-server, the hour and the candles all clearly signify the mystery of the Blessed Trinity.” “This is all nonsense, and worse than nonsense,” said the priest; “it is nothing but superstition. The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass has the same power and efficacy, whether it is said at seven or at nine o’clock, whether the priest is forty or thirty-one years old, or whether there are three, four, or two candles on the altar. Away with such devotions! If you want to offend God, my friend, by a grievous mortal sin, and to cure your child by the help of the devil, then you can do as you please.” Thus he dismissed the simple-minded lady.

II. Let me now give you a general rule, by which you can determine whether there is anything that savors of superstition in even the holiest practices of devotion. Whenever there is an obligation to observe a certain time or hour, a certain number or a certain posture. For instance, a certain prayer or devotion, no matter how holy it is, must be said or performed on a certain day at sunrise, at a certain altar, in a certain church, kneeling on a stone; the sign of the cross has to be made so many times, and so many *Our Fathers* have to be said. Furthermore, if this designated place, time, number, or method be not strictly observed, you are told that the prayer or devotion in question will lose all its efficacy. Now this, my friends, gives manifest proof of a shameful superstition. It is far different with the public devotions approved of by the Church, for instance, the devotion of the nine Tuesdays in honor of St. Anthony of Padua, or that of the ten Fridays in honor of St. Francis Xavier, the apostle of India, on which days it is the custom to confess and communicate, in order to receive the grace of God through the intercession and merits of those great Saints. Still, if even in this case one were to put his faith in a certain number or a certain day, that if he missed confession or Communion on one of the nine or ten days, or if he did not confess on the Tuesday or Friday, he would think that his devotions were of no good, then he would be guilty of superstition. The fixed number of Tuesdays and Fridays has nothing to do with it. Confession and Communion on a Sunday in honor of a saint is just as meritorious as on a Tuesday or a Friday.

Another general rule for detecting superstition in prayers and holy things is when an infallible power or efficacy for eternal salvation is attributed to them. For example, if some one declares that he who says the *Our Father* and *Hail Mary* seven times, and continues to say them until they have reached the number of drops of blood that our Lord shed during His scourging, will certainly go to heaven, he tells a barefaced lie and gives utterance to a deceit of the devil. It is not enough for the fisherman merely to cast his hook and line into the water; if he does not attach the proper bait to his hook, and cast it where the fish are known to abound, he will be a long time without getting a bite. Again, to kill flies in a room you must disguise the taste of the poison by sugar, or honey, or sweet milk. It is in this way that the wily fiend acts. If he were to propose to pious people superstitious practices, which have clearly no power in themselves to produce the desired effect, he would not succeed in catching one of them, nor in making one believe in him, and so he prepares a more agreeable bait for them. In order to induce them to take the poison, he mixes honey with it. He brings in the name of Christ, and deludes them largely with a semblance of holy ceremonies, and he not only promises temporal prosperity to those who use these false devotions, irrespective of their way of life, but also a happy death and the eternal salvation of their souls. In this evil snare he catches numberless Christians.

There are certain prayers that are good enough in themselves, but to the recitation of which are attached infallible promises of all kinds. For instance, he who recites such a prayer daily may expect on his deathbed to see the Mother of God, according to her promise. Another guarantees that he shall not die without the Last

Sacraments, or that Christ will be merciful to him in his last moments. Another, that the reciter thereof will soon be freed from purgatory—and so on, strongly reminding one of the advertisements of a quack medicine which claims to be a panacea for all human ills. What are we to think of these prayers? As far as I am concerned, they may be good enough in themselves, and I would not forbid any one to say them; but as to the promises connected with them, I would not give a straw for them. They are mere clap-traps, invented by the devil to deceive the inexperienced, and to give them a foolish confidence of salvation, on the strength of which they often lead an impious life, thinking that they cannot be lost as long as they say these prayers daily. That is not the way to go to heaven in true and simple faith. To place one's trust in such things, and to risk one's eternal salvation by their use, is to sin by gross superstition.

But you will say: Does not God tell us all to pray, and has not St. James told us to “ask in faith, nothing wavering”? You cannot deny that two of the most excellent qualities of fervent prayer are faith and confidence; may not, nay, *must* not, one put his faith and trust in prayer, without being guilty of superstition? Certainly. But on what, pray tell me, does our faith and confidence in prayer repose? Not on certain words that can be altered or omitted at will, but on the infallible promises and faithfulness of God, who has promised to give me everything that is necessary for my soul, not (I repeat) on account of certain words, but on account of the fervor, humility, and perseverance of my prayer. Pray, then, and pray humbly and fervently, and God will grant you a happy death. Believe also, and have a firm confidence that God will give you the grace of final perseverance, provided you strive for it during life, for that is the condition on which it is granted. Pray, and pray fervently, for the grace to live well, and to be faithful to the end in the love and service of God and his Blessed Mother. Believe, and have a firm confidence that God will give, and our Lady obtain for you grace enough to remain constant, provided you co-operate with your present graces. This is another condition that must be fulfilled. And all this you will get from God whether you use this form of words or that. Therefore, a certain form of words has nothing at all to do with the efficacy of prayer, much less can it make one sure of salvation.

Therefore, they believe and hope in vain who expect to find salvation by such means. They are mad, indeed, who deceive themselves by superstitious practices of any kind! For from whom do they expect help? From the devil, and from no one else. But the devil can do nothing but what God permits him to do. He cannot exceed by a hair's breadth the divine permission as to circumstances of time, place, and manner. You will read in the Holy Scriptures of this evil spirit speaking by the mouths of four hundred false prophets, in order to deceive king Achab, but he had first to ask and receive permission from God to that effect. You will find that he is a cruel spirit who excited all the elements against the pious Job; but not before he had permission from God to torment that wonderful man; nor dared he advance a single step until the divine permission was granted him. First of all, he got leave to attack Job in his worldly goods, but on the express condition that he should not hurt his body: “All that he hath is in thy hand,” said the Lord to Satan; “only, put not forth thy hand upon the person.” After that God gave him permission to torment Job's body also, but on condition that he would do nothing to his soul. And the Lord said to Satan: “Behold he is in thy hand, but yet save his life.” You will find this arch-enemy of God and man an unclean spirit, who wishes to enter into a herd of swine, but not even that could he do until Christ gave him leave. See how little power the devil has - he cannot hurt even swine unless our Lord allows him to do so. How much less, then, can he hurt or help man, who is made to the image of God?

Therefore, I say to you with David: “Trust in the Lord, and do good, and dwell in the land, and thou shalt be fed with its riches. Delight in the Lord, and he will give thee the requests of thy heart.” Away with everything - prayers, devotions and holy things which savor of superstition! Let us put our hope in God, in His infinite goodness and mercy, and in the intercession of Mary and of the Angels and Saints. But we must not be content with that alone: Trust in God, and do good; not only that which is good in itself, but that which will make you good. To hear Mass, and to say the Rosary, and to give alms, are good works; but if you do them in the state of mortal sin they will not make you good, nor will they help you much to salvation. With a good prayer on our lips, and confidence in our hearts, and good works in our hands, we shall find out the truth of the words: “How good is God to Israel, to them that are of a right heart,” to those who serve him constantly with faithful hearts. We shall find that he who trusts in the Lord and serves him, and loves him with all his heart, will not be confounded forever. Amen.

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