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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 + + +

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SECOND SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

Those Who Hear the Word of God without Fruit

“Whatsoever he shall say to you, do ye.” St. John 2:5.

Certainly a salutary and holy exhortation, and one worthy to fall from the lips of the Most Blessed Virgin, who was specially enlightened by God, and whose will was never different from the will of God. “Whatsoever he shall say to ye, do ye;” if you are attentive to every word and sign of my Son, you cannot go wrong. Let us all take this exhortation to ourselves, just as if we heard from the lips of Mary, our dearest Mother, every time we hear a sermon, “whatsoever he shall say to ye, do ye;” be attentive to all that God is about to say to your hearts, so as to live in accordance with it. Oh, if that were always done, what great profit would accrue to souls! But, unfortunately, how many Christians there are who despise the Word of God, and seldom go to sermons! Now I go on to speak of those who constantly hear sermons, amongst whom also there are many who profit as little by what they hear as if they never came to a sermon at all. How so?

Many hear the Word of God in sermons, but without fruit or profit; because the seed falls by the wayside.

There are three causes which prevent the seed that falls by the wayside from bearing fruit.

1. The first is, because the wayside is an open public place, where the seed can easily be blown away by the wind;
 2. The second, because the seed, not being covered with earth, cannot take root;
 3. The third, because it is liable to be trodden under foot by the passers-by, or to be eaten by the birds.
- In like manner the devil has three ways of taking the Word of God out of the hearts of those who hear it, so that it brings no fruit or profit to the soul.

I. Some, as if they were like a public way that is open on all sides, he prevents from understanding the word of God; and these are the idle.

II. Others he prevents from attending to the roots, that is, to the principal truth that is explained; and these are the curious.

III. With others again he causes the truths they have heard and understood to be trampled on and devoured; and these are the tepid and lukewarm.

With all these people the efforts of the devil are to “take the Word out of their hearts, lest, believing, they should be saved” (St. Luke 8:12).

I. The first consists of those who hear the sermon with distracted minds—that is, those idle people who come to church to hear a sermon, not through a supernatural motive to learn something good and to be aroused to do good, but simply to pass away the time, or to accompany others, or to pass themselves off as good Christians, or merely that they may be able to say that they have been to the sermon. Thus they are in the church in which the sermon is preached, but they are, so to speak, not present at the sermon; their bodies are there, but not their minds and hearts, which are occupied with a hundred voluntary distractions, so that they hear the sound of the preacher’s voice by the outward organs of sense, and yet understand little or nothing of what he says. They show clearly enough by their constant looking about at the least noise, by their nodding and bowing to those who come in, and sometimes, too, by going asleep, that they have not brought attentive minds and hearts to the sermon, and that they are not listening with any desire to profit by what they hear. And that is the very result that the spirit of envy, the devil, tries so hard to bring about. He knows what harm the Word of God can do him when it is listened to with a certain amount of attention and eagerness; it fills him with bitter envy to see so many souls thereby freed from his slavery and led to love God zealously; and therefore he tries, in every possible way, when he cannot prevent people from coming to the sermon, at least to distract them, so that they understand little or nothing of it.

II. The second class of those who scatter the seed of the Word of God by the wayside, where it can neither strike root nor produce fruit, are the curious, who listen to sermons with great attention, nay, with great pleasure and eagerness, but do not pay any attention to the fundamental truth that is being explained; for they are simply anxious to hear how the preacher treats his subject, but they are not at all concerned about deriving profit for their souls from what they hear. They listen for the sake of an intellectual treat, not to have their wills moved to do good or to avoid evil. They are like those artists who come to the churches to look at the pictures of Christ and the Saints. What do they look at them for? Their chief idea is to see whether the picture is in accordance with the rules of art, how the outlines, shades and colors harmonize with the subject, whether the limbs are in due proportion. But if a pious man comes into the church and looks at the same pictures out of devotion, on his knees and with folded hands, they bring to his mind Christ, or the Saints of God, and excite in him a true sorrow for sin, fervent love of Jesus Christ crucified, and a profound sense of humility and self-abasement by representing to him the lives of the Saints. The others go away as they came; they gained nothing by looking at the pictures, except that they can say: I have seen a beautiful painting in such and such a church.

“Go to the ant” (Prov. 6:6), says the Holy Ghost to the slothful and lazy, who lead idle, useless lives, and learn from them how to employ your time. We might say to those curious hearers of the Word of God, “go to the bees,” and learn from them how to extract profit and advantage for your souls from sermons. Consider how the bees fly about in the garden, or in the open field. What sort of flowers are they seeking so diligently? Roses, violets, tulips and the like, which lend most beauty to the garden by their varied colors? By no means; those thrifty little creatures do not care much for flowers of that kind; they are not attracted either by their delicious perfume, or their beautiful colors; all they want is honey, that is so useful and so pleasing to the taste. Therefore, it is no matter to them what a flower or herb looks like, whether it grows wild in the fields, or is carefully cultivated in the garden, whether it is red or white, blue or black, sweet or bitter; it is all one to them, as long as they can find the precious honey they are looking for; and when they have found that they are satisfied, for they have attained the object of their desires. “Go to the bees,” oh, Christians, and learn from them what you must seek and pay special attention to when you hear a sermon. Learn to seek not the outward pomp and magnificence of words, but the substantial truth that is explained for you, the cogency of the arguments and proofs that are adduced, the infallible authority of the Holy Scripture, and the maxims and sayings of the holy Doctors of the Church which confirm that truth. Whether the truth is sweet or bitter, terrible or consoling, should be a matter of indifference to you if you are concerned about your soul’s welfare. The honey that you have to extract from it, and to bring away with you, is the clear knowledge of your past sins and of the faults that have hitherto escaped you, the impulse to amend your life, zeal in the divine service, and your spiritual advantage. If you do not seek that, the sermon is of no good to you, and you are only wasting your time

listening to it; you scatter the precious seed of the Word of God by the wayside, where it cannot grow nor take root, and you are playing into the hands of the devil, whose whole effort is to take the Word away from you, "lest, believing, you should be saved."

III. The third and last class of those who let the seed of the Word of God fall by the wayside, and be eaten by the birds, consists of those Christians who are lazy and slothful in the divine service; who immediately forget the truths they have heard. They listen to the sermon, and listen to it with great eagerness and attention; nor are they indifferent to the truths preached to them, which they understand very well, so that they can offer no objections against them; frequently, too, their understandings are enlightened and their wills impelled to change their lives and to amend their faults; but it all lasts only till the end of the sermon; when the preacher leaves the pulpit they forget all he has said; they are just as quick in forgetting as they were in learning, so that, if they were asked on the same evening, or on the following day, whether they remembered anything of the sermon or learned anything from it, they would have to answer that they knew nothing more about it. St. James, in his epistle, compares people of that kind to a man who looks at himself in a glass: for the Word of God is a glass in which the beauty of virtue, the deformity of vice, the gravity of sin, and the actual state of the soul, may be seen. Now, he who hears this Word, and immediately forgets it, is, according to the Apostle, like a man who looks at himself in the glass, and presently goes away and forgets what he is like. "For," says the Apostle, "if a man be a hearer of the Word, and not a doer, he shall be compared to a man beholding his own countenance in a glass. For he beheld himself and went his way, and presently forgot what manner of man he was" (James 1:23, 24). The hearts of such people are like to a stomach which takes in food and drink with appetite, but rejects them with violence before the process of digestion begins. The food of the soul is the Word of God, but it is rejected, like food taken into a sick stomach, when it does not remain in the memory. Just as it is a certain sign of a weak stomach to reject food and drink, so it is an almost infallible sign of a soul being injured by carelessness in the divine service, when it hears the Word of God, and at once forgets it. That forgetfulness is to be attributed to the fact that, when the sermon is over, those people at once occupy their minds with their usual worldly cares and occupations, and go into company, or engage in conversations which distract them, and prevent them from giving due consideration to the truths they have heard, so as to impress them on the memory.

Ah, some pious souls will probably say with fear and trembling, if it is necessary to keep constantly in the memory what one has heard in sermons, then certainly I am not one of those whom Jesus Christ has pronounced blessed! For, no matter how attentive and eager I am to hear and to retain what I have heard, I still forget it, and am never able to say what I have heard on the preceding Sunday. I have no difficulty in believing that you are speaking the truth, and that there are many who are in the same state as yourselves. But it is not necessary, by any means, to be always able to relate what you have heard in a sermon; I myself could not now tell you exactly what I said in my sermon last Sunday, although I knew it then. It is enough for us that the thing itself, that is, the truth we have learned, remains in the memory; it is not at all necessary for us to be always recalling it to our minds. It is, in fact, an utter impossibility for us to do that, because we have so many different things to think of during the day. But when an opportunity offers of doing or omitting anything according to the truth we have learned, we must then try to remember that truth and to act according to it; for instance, you have heard a sermon about Christian patience under trials, and you have learned that all crosses, no matter by what name they are called or how they come to us, are to be attributed to God, who, with the best intentions and out of the fullness of His love for us, sends us those crosses for our spiritual good, and is looking on while we are suffering pain and anguish. Now, you do not think of all this for some time after, and you would not be able to say, if you were asked, what proofs, or texts of Scripture, or examples of the Saints, the preacher brought forward to substantiate the truth he was explaining; nor is it necessary that you should be able to do so. But suppose that after an interval of six months some calamity, or sickness, or trouble befalls you; at first you are quite disturbed and bewildered, and you get angry with the person whom you blame for the misfortune that has happened you; but, when you recollect yourself, the thought occurs to you: oh, I heard once in a sermon that all trials come from God, and must therefore be borne with patience and resignation. I acknowledged the truth of that when I heard it, and I also made a resolution to resign myself patiently to the will of God in all troubles. Now I have a fine opportunity of carrying that resolution into effect; I must, then, and will be patient under this trial. You have heard a sermon about the necessity of avoiding the dangers and occasions of sin, because God withdraws His grace from him who, presumptuously and without necessity, ventures into them, and allows him

to fall into sin. You forgot that sermon soon after you heard it; but after some time you were invited to an evening party in which many people of both sexes were to meet and spend the time in dancing and amusing themselves. All at once you remember having heard that such parties are dangerous, and you make up your mind to refuse the invitation politely and to remain at home. You have heard a sermon about detraction, what a grievous sin it is, and how difficult to make proper reparation for; it escapes your memory for a time, until one day you happen to be in company in which people are speaking ill of their neighbor; the sermon occurs to your mind at once; I have heard, you say to yourself, that it is not right, that it is against charity and against the right that my neighbor has to his good name, thus to speak ill of him behind his back; and that the loss he thus suffers in his honor must be made good. Why, then, should I join in this uncharitable conversation? I will hold my tongue and say nothing.

In a word, he who often hears sermons with a good intention, and with an eager desire to profit by them, will always derive some spiritual advantage from them, even though he can never clearly recall them to his memory. A young hermit who once complained to his abbot that his memory was so bad that he could not retain a word of the sermons he heard, although he listened to them eagerly and with a great desire to profit by them, and therefore he was of the opinion that it was simply a loss of time for him to hear sermons. The abbot took two earthen vessels, and, giving one to the young hermit, said: There, go and fill that with water, and when you have washed it quite clean, throw the water out. The young man did so three or four times. Now, said the abbot, which of the two vessels is the cleaner? Of course the one I have washed so often, said the young man. It is just the same with the soul, rejoined the abbot; although the water is at once poured out of the vessel that is washed, still that vessel is cleaner each time. The Word of God is the water provided by him to cleanse souls with; if you hear it constantly and with eagerness, although you imagine that it all escapes your memory at once, and that you can retain none of it, still it always cleanses your soul more and more from the filth of sin, and makes it more beautiful with virtue and more pleasing to God. I conclude with the same advice: "Blessed are they who hear the Word of God and keep it." Amen.

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