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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

THIRD SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

God Refuses His Help to Those Who Voluntarily Rush into Danger

“Lord, if thou wilt, thou canst make me clean.” Matt. 8:2

Great was the confidence shown by this leper in the power and goodness of Jesus Christ. He did not complain, as other beggars are wont to do, of his misery; he did not assail our Lord with importunate cries: “Lord, heal me of my sickness!” but he indirectly declared his firm belief in the almighty power of Christ: “Lord, if thou wilt, thou canst make me clean.” He has not a single doubt of our Lord’s good will. And moved by the lepers’ faith and trust, Christ said to him: “I will; be thou made clean.” With like confidence and faith, my dear brethren, we should make known to God in prayer the necessities of our souls. He is omnipotence itself, and can help us; he is wisdom itself, and knows our wants; he is goodness and mercy itself, and he will help us, if we only do our part. I add this last condition, because the trust of many in the divine assistance is not a supernatural confidence, but rather a sinful presumption. Yes, dear Christians, I declare to you without hesitation

- I. *That the man who exposes himself without necessity to dangerous occasions, has no right to expect the divine assistance; for,*
- II. *God will deprive him of his help in punishment of his presumption.*

I. It is true that even the weakest man is strong enough with the help of God’s grace to resist the attacks of all the powers of hell, and to come off victorious in the greatest dangers. And it is also true, that the good God never abandons a man, unless the latter first abandons him; that he never refuses his help and grace to those who are disposed to receive it, and that he has promised not to forsake us in temptations, according to the words of St. Paul: “God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that which you are able, but will make also with temptation issue, that you may be able to bear it” (I Cor. 10:13). But mark what the same Apostle says in the same verse: “Let no temptation take hold of you but such as is human” (Ibid.). For you must know that there are two kinds of temptation, one which assails us involuntarily by surprise or chance, and which is called human temptation, and the other, into which one goes willingly and without necessity, and which is called diabolical temptation. To rush, open-eyed, into the danger and occasion of sin is proof of a malice more diabolical than human, “Give not place to the devil” (Ephes. 4:27). No man who willfully and needlessly places himself in the occasion of sin can reasonably hope for the grace of God; nay, according to the general arrangements of divine Providence, even if one were to ask for grace in such circumstances, it would not be

given him. By grace I here mean what St. Augustine calls victorious, efficacious grace, that is, the grace by which one really resists his inclinations and overcomes the temptation.

God owes nothing to any one; otherwise the helps he gives would not be graces, which he does not bestow on us according to our will, but according to the decrees of his infinite wisdom, and he gives them when, how, and to whom he pleases. No. where do we read that he has promised the special helps of his grace to one who loves and seeks danger. On the contrary, he has declared: "He that loveth danger, shall perish in it" (Ecclus. 3:27). And justly so. If a respectable man is overtaken by a misfortune which he could not foresee, there is no one, unless it be his sworn enemy, but would pity him. But if you see a man, in spite of oft-repeated, friendly warnings, going headlong to ruin, running all sorts of risks in the most reckless manner, and finally going to the bad altogether, oh, (you think), it serves him right He was warned often enough, and should have known better. You pity the innocent child that is bitten by a dog; but if a naughty boy, who has been provoking the dog, gets bitten, you have no pity for him, and you think he has got what he deserves. Now, if such is the opinion of sensible men in such cases, has not the almighty God still more right on his side to act as he does? Hear what he himself says: "Who will pity a charmer struck by a serpent, or any that come near wild beasts?" (Ecclus. 12:13.) A mountebank will caress a living serpent, and put his finger in its mouth, as such people often do on fair-days; but if he is at last bitten by the serpent, so that he dies from the bite, who will pity him? "So it is with him that keepeth company with a wicked man, and is involved in his sins" (Ibid.). For dangerous company and occasions are poisonous adders and cruel serpents; if you go into them without necessity, and frequent them without scruple, and then fall under the assaults of temptation, who will pity you? Who will help you? Almighty God with his extraordinary graces? Oh, no! Spiritual strength is conferred on us to make us careful, not to encourage us to be reckless.

True, David said of God: "He hath given his angels charge over thee to keep thee in all thy ways. In their hands they shall bear thee up; lest thou dash thy foot against a stone" (Ps. 90:11, 12). But that protection will be given "in thy ways," not in your headlong rushing into danger. In your ordinary ways; that is, in the occasions that you cannot avoid, and that you must frequent in order to fulfill the duties of your state, although there may be temptations and dangers of evil in them. In those, the Angels will perform their office, and endeavor to protect you from sin; but not in those occasions into which you rush without necessity, for the purpose of gratifying your inordinate appetites, your sensuality, or your impure inclinations. Do you know the answer that Christ gave the tempter, when the latter brought him up to the pinnacle of the Temple, asking him to throw himself down, to prove the truth of the divine promise, "He hath given his angels charge over thee, etc."? Our Lord replied to him: "Thou shalt not tempt the Lord, thy God" (Matt. 4:7) From this, you may conclude that to expect the special help of grace in dangerous company that one seeks deliberately, or frequents for the sake of amusement, is not confidence in God, but rather presumption, and a tempting of God. "Vain is the hope," says St. Augustine, "that expects to be safe in the midst of allurements to sin." Have you ever heard of any one venturing out to sea in a ship, after the sailors had told him that she was not seaworthy? Have you ever heard of any one going into a pest-house against the warnings of his neighbors? God calls out to the reckless soul in unmistakable accents: "Avoid that sinking ship! Go not near that evil house! 'he that loveth danger shall perish in it!'" The holy angels call out to it with their good inspirations: "Go back!" The holy Fathers of the Church cry out to it with their exhortations; preachers and confessors implore it in the name of God, to keep away from the danger into which necessity does not compel it to go. All agree in telling it, that such occasions and company are a source of unspeakable danger, that the Evil One lies in wait for it there, that it runs the risk of being infected with a mortal spiritual malady.

II. But that unhappy soul cares nothing for it all. It trusts in the help of God, and hopes that he will keep it free from sin. Let it have its own way. It will soon see how it will end. God will permit it to be cruelly wounded; nay, perhaps, lose its spiritual life forever. Once for all, "vain is the hope that expects to be safe in the midst of allurements to sin."

If, says St. Bernard, God were prepared to help us with his powerful graces in those dangers which we seek of our own accord, then those holy people whose example we are exhorted to follow have acted imprudently and have given themselves unnecessary trouble in separating themselves from the society of men, and living in gloomy solitudes, continually mortifying their senses, in order to avoid the danger of sin. The innocent Job, whose holiness was attested by God himself, made a compact with his eyes, so as not to admit even a thought of

a person of the opposite sex: “I made a covenant with my eyes, that I would not so much as think upon a virgin” (Job 31:1). St. John Chrysostom cannot sufficiently express his astonishment at this; it seems a strange thing, he says, for such a heroic man, who fought so bravely against the devil, and gained so many victories over him, to fear an innocent maiden and turn his eyes away from her, as if she were more to be dreaded than the evil spirit himself. When he saw the latter approach, he did not fly, but remained, boldly holding his ground and confident that he would be able to overcome him; but he did not dare to remain in the presence of a virgin, and as soon as he saw one approach, he turned his eyes in another direction. “For he thought that in a contest against the demons he should give proof of a manly courage and constancy, but when fighting in the cause of holy purity, that the victory was to be gained, not by seeking, but by avoiding the company of persons of the other sex,” St. John the Baptist, who came into the world endowed with sanctifying grace, and who, according to the testimony of our Lord, was the greatest of all born of woman, went into the wilderness in his very childhood. St. Jerome, a man of consummate wisdom, took up his dwelling amongst the wild beasts, beating his breast with a stone, and becoming so emaciated by constant fasts and austerities, that he almost lost the semblance of a human being. This he did, in order to preserve his soul from danger; yet he complains most piteously that, although the sound of the last trumpet was always ringing in his ears, pictures of the dancing-women he had seen at Rome in his youth were constantly coming before his imagination, and tempting him to impure desires. “I,” he says, “who was the companion of scorpions and wild beasts, was often present in spirit among the dancing-girls.” When Vigilantius asked him why he did not live like other men, and reproached him with a cowardice unworthy of a great man, in flying into the desert, he answered “I acknowledge my weakness;” for, if my eyes happened to rest on a person of the opposite sex, “I might lose the victory.” See how the great friends of God take to flight in order not to look on anything dangerous, and how they do not dare to hope for any special help from God if they do not avoid such occasions; while you, who frequent company of that kind, and spend your time in laughing, joking, and amusing yourself, imagine you have nothing to fear? You hope to be free from all temptations, and to be able to overcome them if they should assail you, because you rely on the grace of God? Ah! vain, deceitful hope!

And if what you urge were true, my brethren, then, indeed, might we all leave our convents and roam about the world at will. Why? Because, whether alone or in company, whether seeking the danger or avoiding it, we should be always invincible, trusting that the almighty God would always give us his grace, in any case. “I can do all things in him who strengtheneth me” (Phil. 4:13), I might say with St. Paul But I know, too, that the same God abandons all those who go into dangerous company without necessity.

The innocent *Dina*, daughter of the patriarch Jacob, went out to see the women of the strange land into which she had come

“And *Dina*, the daughter of Lia, went out to see the women of that country” (Gen. 34:1). And her curiosity cost her her maidenly purity. But how is that? Did not Judith venture into far greater danger, when, decked out in all her beauty, she went into the enemy’s camp and spent a whole evening eating, drinking, and feasting with the lustful Holofernes? Why did God protect her from all danger, and abandon *Dina*? He protected Judith because she went into the danger in obedience to a divine inspiration, while *Dina* was influenced only by a vain curiosity. And what kind of a woman was Judith, in comparison with *Dina*? She was a God-fearing widow, who avoided carefully not only every evident danger, but also everything that might remotely tend to lead her into sin: “She made herself a private chamber in the upper part of her house, in which she abode, shut up with her maids, and she wore hair-cloth upon her loins, and fasted all the days of her life; she feared the Lord very much, neither was there anyone that spoke an ill word of her” (Jud. 8:5, 6, 8). What help and protection could not such a holy woman expect in all temptations and dangers from the God whom she loved so much? Nevertheless, before she went into danger, before, in obedience to the divine inspiration, and for her country’s sake, she exposed herself to the temptations of an Assyrian camp, with what prudence did she not make her preparations? She first reflected deeply as to whether the idea she was about to carry into effect really came from God or not; and although modesty prompted her to say nothing of it to any one, yet she disclosed her design to two ancients of the people, who had authority in the town, with the sole intention of asking their advice, and of finding out whether their opinion agreed with hers as to the divine origin of her inspiration. To this end, she begged of them to pray fervently for light: “So that which I intend to do, prove ye if it be of God, and pray that God may strengthen my design” (Ibid. 31). She often asked them to pray for her: “Let nothing else be done, but to pray

for me to the Lord, our God” (Ibid. 33). Before adorning herself she shut herself up, clothed in sack-cloth, with her head covered with ashes, and prostrated herself before the Lord, praying to him long and fervently. When she had finished all her preparations, she prayed as she was going out of the gate of the town; nay, she spent a great part of the night in the Assyrian camp in watching and prayer. Frequently, she protested that the sole end she aimed at was the honor that would accrue to God, if it could be said, one day, that he had conquered the Assyrians by the hand of a woman. Why should we be surprised, then, if God, who never abandons those who love him with all their hearts and trust in him alone, helped his handmaid and kept her free from dishonor and sin, even in the midst of danger? In the same way, he protected the innocence of Joseph in Egypt against the caresses of an impure woman; and the conjugal chastity of Susanna, he saved from the violence of the two elders; but none of these dangers were sought voluntarily; for Joseph ran away, leaving his mantle behind him, while Susanna called for help as well as she could. If Joseph and Susanna had loved the dangerous company, as so many do, nowadays, would they have gained such a glorious victory? Would they not rather have lost the grace of God, and sinned most shamefully, as a consequence of their fool-hardiness?

We have a still more striking example of this in the New Testament, in the persons of the Apostles, Peter and Paul. Both were, although at different times, in Jerusalem in the same occasion and temptation: Peter, in the court of the high-priest; Paul, amongst the furious Jews. The question for both of them was whether they would deny Christ, or courageously confess him. Peter declared to his divine Master: “Yea, though I should die with thee, I will not deny thee” (Matt. 26:35). Paul said to his disciples: “For I am ready not only to be bound, but to die also in Jerusalem, for the name of the Lord Jesus” (Acts 21:13). But how differently they acted in the hour of trial! Peter falls most deplorably, and denies his beloved Master three times on oath, while Paul confesses him steadfastly. And why? Because Peter trusted too much in himself, and deliberately rushed into the occasion, against the express prophecy and warning of our Lord. For what had he to do in the house of the high-priest? Why did he go into the company of people who were the avowed enemies of Christ? He should have kept away from them. It was not so with St. Paul. “And now behold,” he says, “being bound in the Spirit, I go to Jerusalem” (Ibid. 20:22). It is the voice of God, and not my own will, that urges me to go into the midst of the enemies of Christ. If Peter had gone into the house of the high-priest in obedience to a divine inspiration, he would doubtless have been strengthened by a powerful grace, and have avoided that lamentable fall, which he never ceased to deplore afterwards, as long as he lived. If Paul, on the other hand had wantonly sought the danger, he would not have fought so valiantly nor gained such a glorious victory. From this, too, my dear brethren, you may conclude that no one can rely on the help of God if he deliberately runs into danger, but can regard it as almost certain, that he will be forsaken by the Lord, and so will fall into sin. Profit, therefore, my brethren, by the warning of the Holy Ghost, and fly, if you wish to avoid sin.

But, you will, perhaps, exclaim: “What are you saying to us about company? It is not unlawful for men and women to meet together, to speak, laugh with, and amuse one another! Common courtesy amongst friends and relations requires that. I was often in company of that kind, but I cannot say that I was anything the worse for it. And you are actually trying to make it sinful!” You are mistaken. I do not say that such meetings are unlawful, nor such associations evidently sinful. I only maintain that, when such company is sought too often and without necessity, there is danger of being led away and of committing sin; for the infallible word of God assures us, that he who loves the danger shall perish in it. They who wish to do everything that is lawful, will easily be brought so far as to do what is unlawful. “If thy right hand scandalize thee,” says our Lord, “cut it off and cast it from thee.” We must not only cut off the left hand, he says, that is, shun all that is unlawful and sinful; but also the right hand, that is, we must avoid things that are lawful and seem to be harmless, if they can be an occasion of sin to us.

“I have often,” you maintain, “been in company of the kind, but I cannot say that it has done me any harm! “Presumption is an unfortunate and a dangerous thing; for it makes many think they have conquered, when in reality they are conquered. I quite believe that the company you speak of did not lead you into the commission of any sinful outward action, but did you do no evil in your heart? And even if that remained pure for the first two or three times, still I tell you to be on your guard against the deceits of the devil. That crafty enemy sometimes acts towards us as the leopard does with the ape. The leopard is most eager in pursuit of the ape, because he likes its flesh better than that of any other animal. The ape, however, when it sees its enemy coming, climbs up a tree, where it is in safety. The leopard then has recourse to artifice; he lies down at the foot of the

tree, restrains his breathing as much as possible, and pretends to be dead. When the ape has seen its enemy lie thus apparently lifeless for some hours, it descends and begins to leap and play about him, not suspecting any danger; but that is the leopard's opportunity, who at once, seizing hold of the ape, devours it. So, I fear it will be with you and the dangerous company into which you are so fond of going. For some time, the devil pretends to be dead. He leaves you in peace, and does not attack you with the least temptation; so that, you really come away without committing sin. But why does he act like that? Simply to induce you to believe that you are in no danger, so that you may frequent such company again and again, and thus give him an opportunity of assailing you with grievous temptations, and leading you into sin. Therefore I warn you in these words of the Holy Ghost "Never trust thy enemy: for as a brass pot his wickedness rusteth: though he humbleth himself and go crouching, yet take good heed and beware of him" (Ecclus. 12:10, 11).

You urge further, perhaps: It is only with respectable people, in fact, with your own friends and relatives, that you associate? Ah, pretext of respectability! ah, friendship and relationship! how many souls you have brought to destruction! Those very things (good as they may seem in themselves), only add to the danger, since they put one off one's guard, encourage greater familiarity, and thus inflame the heart more strongly with the fire of unlawful love. Must we, then (you ask), avoid all friendship and society? No, I do not say that; but you must not seek such company too often, nor make too free in it, especially, if you have your passions excited in it. St. Louis, the son of Charles of Naples, once went to visit his mother, the queen, who had not seen him for a long time, and who, therefore, wished to embrace him, "Stop," said St. Louis, "that will not do!" "But I am your mother," said the queen. "True," he replied, "you are my mother, but you are a woman, and therefore a servant of God must not be too free with you." St. Augustine says that, no matter who they are, persons of the other sex should not be treated with too much freedom: "They who think they can be familiar with women, and yet be victorious, do not know that they are guilty of a twofold sin in the sight of God, inasmuch as they run into danger themselves, and also give a bad example to others of a dangerous familiarity."

By way of conclusion, my dear brethren, I again repeat the words of the Holy Ghost, "Flee from sin as from the face of a serpent" (Ecclus. 21:2). He who wishes to keep from all sin must imitate the penitent David: "I have hated all wicked ways" (Ps. 118:128). Mark how he says that he hates not merely all sin, but all the ways that lead to it even remotely. God withdraws his grace from the presumptuous, and he who loves danger shall perish in it. Amen.

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