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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

FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

The Necessity of Removing the Proximate Occasion of Sin

"Lord save us, we perish." Matt. 8:25.

"Lord, save us: we perish!" The disciples of Christ could offer this prayer with the greatest confidence of being heard and saved. They were in imminent danger, but they had followed their divine Master into the ship, and had him with them as their Protector. If they had noticed beforehand the stormy state of the sea, and had nevertheless obstinately determined to trust themselves to it, without the protecting presence of the Lord, what would they have had to expect, if not shipwreck? The same way, my dear brethren, they who, without absolute necessity venture into all sorts of dangerous occasions and company, desire, hope for, and expect in vain the help of God. If this holds good of merely remote occasions of sin, what shall we say of the proximate occasions? Certainly, my friends, if you wish to escape mortal sin and eternal ruin, you must

I. Avoid those companions who are a proximate occasion of sin to you, and

II. You must avoid them for all time.

I. That we may not be groping in the dark, we must first try to find out what is the proximate occasion of sin. It is nothing else but a danger into which, if one runs, or remains, he, generally speaking, falls into sin, whether in thought or desire, in words or conversation, in deed or action. Here each one must consider his own nature and weakness, his desires and inclinations, and his past experience; for the same circumstance that may be the proximate occasion of sin to one, is not so to another. For instance, I know by experience that, whenever I go to a certain house, I sin against holy purity; or else that, out of ten times, for example, that I have been there, I have sinned seven or eight times. That house, as long as the same people live in it, is the proximate occasion of sin to me. In the same way, you are in the habit of consenting to an unchaste desire when you look at a certain person of the opposite sex, or at a picture that is not sufficiently decent; a deliberate look at that person or that picture is the proximate occasion of sin for you. Another, when in company with certain friends of his, is wont to indulge in impure discourse and to take a sinful pleasure in it; those companions are for him the proximate occasion of sin. Another is living in a house where he constantly sees a person for whom he has an impure

attachment, so that he, generally speaking, whenever he sees that person, consents to unlawful desires and thoughts, or actually commits some sinful action; to remain in that house is for him the proximate occasion of sin. Another knows from experience that, when he takes too much to drink, although he may not actually get drunk he is wont to commit sins of impurity, or to be quarrelsome; that drink is to him the proximate occasion of sin. A young person of the opposite sex knows by experience that, if she spends her time in the evenings standing at the door, she is likely to meet with some companion of the neighborhood, who will lead her into sin; that habit is for her the proximate occasion of sin. And so on for other circumstances.

Now, I repeat, he who is not *firmly* resolved to shun such an occasion once for all, or, if he is actually in it, to give it up completely, cannot be saved from eternal ruin, no matter how often he goes to confession or holy Communion. He is and remains in the state of sin. Why so? Because, even if his going into such an occasion, or his remaining in it, should not be the cause of sin to him now and then, yet it is in itself a sin which God has forbidden under pain of eternal damnation. For he who forbids the end, forbids also the means that must of necessity lead to that end ; and he who forbids me to commit sin forbids me also to have anything to do with that which, humanly speaking, necessarily brings sin along with it, in short ,with the proximate occasion.

In the very beginning, God forbade our forefather, Adam, to eat the fruit of the tree that was in the middle of Paradise: "Of the tree of knowledge of good and evil thou shalt not eat. For in what day soever thou shalt eat of it, thou shalt die the death" (Gen. 2:7). Did he, then, forbid only the eating of the fruit? So it would appear if we consider the words of the commandment; but hear the answer that Eve gave to the serpent afterwards, when he asked her why she did not enjoy such beautiful fruit: "Of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of paradise, God hath commanded us that we should not eat; and that we should not touch it, lest perhaps we die" (Ibid. 3:3). Mark those words, we must not even "*touch*" the fruit. Its very touch, the sight of its pleasing colors, its agreeable smell, were so enticing, that we could not refrain from eating it. Such was Eve's line of argument, and she concluded, therefore, God has forbidden us not merely to eat of the fruit, but even to touch it.

God's commandment to the Israelites was attended with like limitations. He forbade them to adore false gods, and in order to remove every dangerous occasion out of their way, he commanded them at the same time to burn all their graven images: "Their graven things, thou shalt burn with fire" (Deut. 7:25). They were not to keep any of these things in their houses, or even to desire the silver and gold of which they were made: He had commanded them not to eat leavened bread on Easter, and therefore, they were obliged to throw away all such bread out of their houses during the Paschal time. The Nazarenes were not allowed to drink wine, and had consequently to abstain from eating fresh or dried grapes, lest the taste of the fruit should entice them to taste the wine also. With still greater care, says St. John Chrysostom, did our Lord, in the law of grace, endeavor to cut off the occasions that might lead us to transgress his commands. He tells us in the Gospel of St. Matthew that, "Whosoever is angry with his brother, shall be in danger of the judgment and whosoever shall say: Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire" (Matt. 5:22). But why so severe, O Lord? That no occasion may be given to violate the fifth commandment: "Thou shalt not kill." For if it were lawful to vent one's anger against another, to abuse and vilify him, there would be the greatest danger of coming to blows, and even murder, in the end. The only confirmation to your speech shall be, yes or no; never shall you swear unless compelled thereto by absolute necessity. Why? That you may have no occasion to violate that other commandment: "Thou shalt not bear false witness."

But with regard to the commandment forbidding adultery and other sins of impurity, to which our miserable nature is so inclined, oh, how careful Christ was! He has closed our eyes, ears, mouths, hearts, and minds against this vice, and forbidden us, under pain of sin, to look at, listen to, speak or think of, voluntarily, anything impure, to look at a person of the opposite sex with desire, or even to mention the vice: "All uncleanness, let it not so much as be named among you" (Ephes. 5:3), as St. Paul says. He has forbidden us, under pain of sin, to hang up anything on the walls of our rooms, or to allow anything to appear in our dress or outward behavior, which might be suggestive of impure ideas. He has commanded us, under pain of sin, to give up the friendship and society of those who are apt to lead us into this vice, no matter how dear they are to us, or how useful or necessary we find them; for such is the meaning of those well-known words in the Gospel: "If thy eye scandalize thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee" (Matt. 13:9); that is, if a person who is dear to you as the apple of your eye is the occasion of sin to you, *away* with him at once. "And if thy hand or thy foot scandalize

thee, cut it off and cast it from thee” (Ibid. 8): that is, if you gain more by visiting that house than you could by the work of your hands, and if that house is the occasion of sin to you, you must avoid it altogether. If the society of that person is so necessary to your comfort and well-being, that you can as illy spare it as your foot, being an occasion of sin to you, you must leave that person once for all.

Mark, my dear brethren, how exact the command is. Christ does not say: “If thy eye scandalize thee,” close it, so as not to see anything with it, but “pluck it out.” He does not say: “If thy hand or foot scandalize thee,” tie it up, so that it cannot move; but, “cut it off.” Hence it is not enough for the fulfillment of this law for one to say, I will go to that house, or into that company, or to see that person; but I will guard my heart and my senses so as not to fall into sin. No; that is not the way to pluck out the eye, or to cut off the hand or foot. The occasion has to be completely avoided. Our Lord not only says: “Pluck it out” “cut it off,” but “*cast it from thee.*” We must throw away the eye, hand, or foot, without any desire to take it back again. If I break off all intimacy with that evil companion, may I not continue to salute her now and then; to speak with her alone, to write to her occasionally to show that I bear her no hatred? No even that much is dangerous and would be the occasion of unlawful thoughts and desires. Pluck out the eye, and cast it from thee. You must be as much separated from that person as if you did not know her at all, so that you will have neither the wish nor the power of renewing your intimacy with her. “It is better for thee having one eye to enter into life, than having two eyes to be cast into hell fire” (Matt. 18:9).

A man must sacrifice even a great pleasure, or honor, or wealth, rather than enter a house, go into company, or associate with a person who places him in the proximate danger of sin.

Nay, there are many who maintain that, if necessary, one should sacrifice in such circumstances all one’s wealth, honor, and good name, and even life itself, because we must be always prepared to renounce everything, rather than offend God by grievous sin.

II. People sometimes say: “I cannot leave that house, that person, that company; I will go on as usual, but, with the help of God, I will avoid sin!” No matter whether you commit sin or not, you are still guilty in the sight of God, inasmuch as he has forbidden, not only the sinful act, but also the occasion of it. And what is the good of saying: “I will go into the occasion, but by the help of divine grace, I will not commit sin any more?” You might as well say, I will go out at night and leave my door open, trusting to Providence that no thieves will enter my house. I will put my head into the jaws of a raging lion, trusting that God will prevent him from devouring me. I will not give up drinking, but I hope that God will not allow me to get drunk. I will run into the midst of bullets and swords, but, with the help of God, I will not get wounded; I will stand in the middle of a fire, but I hope that God will prevent me from being burned. What foolish talk this is! How many youths were there who came uninjured out of the furnaces of Babylon? The holy Scripture mentions only three; but now it seems that you will be the fourth; for as St. John Chrysostom says, it is as great a miracle for one not to fall into sin, especially in the matter of impurity, when he goes into the occasion of it, as for the three Hebrew youths to have come out of the fire unharmed. Do you think that God will work a miracle to please you, if you wantonly rush into the danger? I take to witness your own experience. How often have you not made the same promise, and sworn almost in the confessional, that you would be careful, with the grace of God, not to fall into sin? And up to the present, that promise has remained unfulfilled. Does not your own conscience tell you that, whenever you went to that person, that company, or that house, you came away with another sin on your soul? In vain, therefore, under those circumstances, do you renew your promises. You sin by your very presumption in remaining in, or willfully seeking the danger.

How little then can one depend on one’s ordinary confessions and absolutions, so long as he continues in the occasion of sin. Many say: “True, that I commit sin generally when I go to that house, or into that company, or to see that person, but I go to confession immediately after, and receive absolution. The priest says nothing to me about the matter, and I must give him credit for knowing his business,” etc. “A fine confession, that!” says St. Ambrose, “a wonderful absolution! Those people are like one who tries to wash himself with an unburnt brick: the more he wets it, and rubs himself with it, the dirtier he becomes.” What better are you for going often to confession, if you continue in the proximate occasion of sin? Instead of cleansing your soul, you only soil it still more by a sacrilegious confession and Communion; *for without an earnest purpose to avoid the occasion of*

sin, you can have neither true sorrow nor resolution of amendment. You do not act honestly with God and your soul; you run from one confessor to another, who does not know the state of your conscience, or you seek one who will not question you much, and to him you tell the sins you have committed since your last confession, but nothing more. You say nothing of the fact that you are in the habit of committing those sins for a long time because you are in the proximate occasion of them, and *that* you are bound to tell. Thus, in an underhand manner, you steal an absolution from a confessor who has no suspicion of how matters really stand with you; but it is an absolution that will do you no good, for it will be written down against you in the great account book, and will only increase your torments in hell. One day, you will find out that your conversion was only a sham, coming from a false and iniquitous heart.

If the confessor knows that you are in the proximate occasion of sin, and are not firmly resolved to renounce it forever, he cannot give you absolution. Nay, if you have often promised him to avoid it, and have not fulfilled your promise, he dare not in the end absolve you from your sins, unless you have really left the sinful occasion; nor must he trust any farther to your mere promise, even if you confirm it with an oath. If, in spite of that, he gives you absolution, then, either he does not know his duty, or else he commits a sin with you, by trying to make a peace between you and God, “which is a vain and false peace, injurious to him who gives it, and in no way profitable to him who receives it.” It is a favor which condemns the judge, and does not acquit the accused.

You must know that, although you may have received absolution a hundred times in that way, if you wish afterwards to do sincere penance and be really converted to God, you must tell in confession all the mortal sins you committed during the whole time you were in the occasion of sin, as well as the number of times you made sacrilegious confessions and Communions. You must repeat all those confessions with true sorrow, because the past absolutions were null and void, because you lacked true sorrow and purpose of amendment.

In conclusion, my dear brethren, let me exhort you in the words of Samuel to the Israelites, “If you turn to the Lord with all your heart, put away the strange gods from among you” (I Kings 7: 3). Do you wish, O sinners, to free yourselves from the state of sin, to be reconciled to God, and to enjoy the peace and repose of a good conscience? “Put away the strange gods,” remove every occasion of sin at once, no matter what it costs you.

Away with it! It is better for you to go to heaven without your dear friend, than to go to hell with him or her. If it were to reduce you to beggary, the person must go. No matter what happens, if it were the loss of life itself, it must be done at once.

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