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St. Joseph had a happy death, but it was not from a Death-Bed repentance.

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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 + + +

VOL. 5 = THE CHRISTIAN'S LAST END

FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

The Vain Hope of a Death-Bed Repentance

"We have labored all the night, and have taken nothing." Luke 5:5.

By the night we understand the state of sin, in which he lives who either does not repent of his sins or who does not earnestly propose to amend his life. While in that state all his works, although they may be good and holy in themselves, cannot gain for him the slightest merit for heaven. If any of you labor in that dismal night, return by true repentance to the clear light? Wait no longer, for it is a deceitful and treacherous hope that builds on the future. But, you may say, when I see that I am dangerously ill I can repent of and confess my sins, and by receiving the last Sacraments gain heaven at the end of my life. Alas! this hope of heaven rests on conversion in the last illness. Now, this is a false, deceitful, and almost desperate hope, for:

In vain do you hope to be converted and save your soul in your last illness.

I. God himself denies you that hope.

II. Experience also denies it to you.

I. All prudent hope must have a reasonable foundation to enable us to trust that we shall obtain what we desire; and that foundation rests chiefly on the promise of the person from whom the favor is to come. That you, oh, sinner! who spend *your* whole life in wickedness, may have the hope of being converted at and before the end of your life, the Almighty God, from whom you have to receive this grace, must either have given you some promise to that effect, or else he must at least have given you some sign by which you can know that your hope is justified. Now, not only has God given you no sign of his will to this effect, but he has rather signified that his design and intention are quite contrary to what you suppose. Consider those terrible words: "Turn ye at my reproof," says the Lord; be converted, and at once! Delay no longer! Otherwise, "Behold, I will utter my spirit to you, and will show you my words. Because I called, and you refused. I stretched out my hand, and there was none that regarded" (Prov. 1:23, 24). I have often spoken to you by the voice of my servants, who warned you against evil; I have called to you by the example of so many good Christians, which should have encouraged you to do good; I have urged you by the inward voice of your own conscience, which was troubled by remorse on account of your wickedness; "and you refused." You have been exhorted in sermons to restore ill-gotten goods, but you have kept them; to renounce that impure intimacy and dangerous occasion, but you remained in it; to pardon your enemy from your heart, but you have refused to do so; to amend your sinful life, to make a

good confession, to avoid sin, and to begin to lead a Christian life; but you refused. “You have despised all my counsel, and have neglected my reprehensions.” And what will be the result? “I also will laugh at your destruction and will mock.” “They shall call upon me, and I will not hear: they shall rise in the morning, and shall not find me.” Overwhelmed by the anguish of death, they will cry out to me: Oh, my God! have mercy on me! but he will not hear them. “They have hated instruction, and received not the fear of the Lord, nor consented to my counsel” (Prov. 1:25, 30).

Therefore the sinner’s hope of a death-bed repentance is a vain one. If it is probable that God will give you the grace of true repentance in your last illness, and that one who has deferred repentance to the hour of death has reasonable ground for hoping that his death will be a happy one, why has God said quite the contrary? Why has he never uttered the least syllable hinting that he is ready to give you such a grace? Why does he rather threaten in the opposite sense? “I will laugh; I will mock; I will not hear; you shall die in your sin,” although you call upon me; you shall not find me, although you seek me. Are you not yet afraid? Do you still believe there is no danger? No need to live piously if you wish to die happily? Have you still hopes of a happy death, when he who alone can give you that grace assures you expressly that you shall die in your sins? You are not sure that you shall have time enough to repent on your death-bed; you are not sure that you shall have the grace of God in your power, the grace which you require to do true penance. You are not sure that your will shall then be ready to hate and detest what it now so foolishly loves; and you are certain that the divine will shall be quite contrary to yours; yet you hope, and confiding in your hope, you continue in sin!

Abraham, who, although commanded by God to slay his only son, still hoped to become the father of a numerous people by that same son! “Who against hope believed in hope, that he might be made the father of many nations” (Rom. 4:18). But great as was the confidence of that holy man, sinners have a still greater; for they hope not only against hope, but in God against God. Abraham believed that God would work a miracle rather than break his promise; they believe that God will rather break his word than not perform a miracle for them in giving them a most extraordinary, wonderful grace of repentance at the last moment. But hope as you wish! If you are not disappointed, all the better for you! At all events, God denies you this hope, “because thou hast not known the time of thy visitation” (Luke 19) because you have allowed the time of grace to pass by unaccountably to God, and unprofitably to yourselves. Experience itself denies you this hope.

II. If God had either promised the last grace to the dying sinner after an ill-spent life, or was wont to give that grace, then after such a long lapse of time, during which there have been so many dying sinners, there must be some examples of the kind; for God is not accustomed to hide his works of goodness and mercy, but rather to make them public to his own honor and praise. You must be able to refer to a number of cases in which it has been granted, and is still granted. Because if one or another has had the luck to find a treasure, that is no reason for you to give up your business in the hope of becoming rich all at once, unless, indeed, you are a fool.

Joseph was brought out of a prison and placed on the throne of Egypt; which of us will therefore go to Egypt among the Turks and allow himself to be chained and fettered in the hope of being promoted to some high dignity? Jonas was swallowed by a whale and thrown out again on the seashore alive; will any one of you throw himself into the sea in the hope of being saved from drowning in a similar manner? You would not attempt it. A certain Phalareus was suffering from a cancer in the head; maddened by the pain, he rushed into the middle of a fierce battle to end at once his miserable life; but an arrow happened to strike the wound and opened it, so that the poisonous matter escaped and freed him from his suffering. If one of you had a similar disease, would he run into the midst of a street broil, and rush upon the spears and swords, in the hope of being cured? I hardly think so. For that which occurs rarely cannot be taken as a general rule.

Now, oh, sinner! give me, if you can, an example of real conversion where repentance was deferred till the hour of death! There is but one well-authenticated case, and that is the good thief on Calvary, the only instance of the kind in the history of the world. “There is one,” says St. Augustine; “do not despair; it is the only one, do not trust too presumptuously.” There was one such case, but of such a nature that it ought to make you tremble. For, in what circumstances did the good thief obtain forgiveness? At the moment when his God was hanging by his side on the cross, and about to give up his life for the salvation of the world. Was it any wonder that Christ should then give some public testimony of the efficacy of his death, or show some extraordinary proof of mercy on the occasion of the consummation of his Passion and death? And yet it was only one to whom that mercy was shown; the other thief, who was also at the side of the dying Saviour, was hurried off to hell by the devils.

I could bring forward many examples (from Scripture and Ecclesiastical History) of people whose experience on their death-beds has been quite the contrary to that of the good thief, and who were condemned to hell without mercy. What St. Paul writes of Esau seems most mournful; he had been living a bad life, and still hoped to inherit the blessing: "Afterwards when he desired to inherit the benediction, he was rejected: for he found no place of repentance, although with tears he had sought it" (Hebr. 12:17). Something of the same kind happened to the wicked Antiochus. This unhappy king had his eyes opened at last, when he fell into a disgusting and grievous illness. "Ah," he sighed, as he was being eaten alive by worms, it is just to be subject to God" (2 Mach. 9:12). What would you say, my dear brethren, if you saw a man dying in such dispositions? Would you not look on him as a saint and wish to be in his place? But hear what the Scripture says of this penitent; words that I would not dare to utter if they were not from the mouth of God himself; words which as long as the world lasts will remain as a warning to sinners who trust their salvation to a death-bed repentance: "Then this wicked man prayed to the Lord, of whom he was not like to obtain mercy" (2 Mach. 9:13). And why not? "Because he did not ask for mercy in due time, nor with a sincere heart." Not at the proper time, because he put it off till the last moment; nor with a sincere heart, because it was not the love of God, nor the supernatural fear of punishment, but simply the dread of death that inspired him with repentance.

I could say the same to you, oh, sinner! If you appeal to the experience of the dying in our own days, as is generally done. We see here and there, you maintain, so many Christians who, although they have led wicked and reckless lives, yet die a happy death as good, pious Christians. But are you sure of that? Oh, yes! They repent of and confess their sins; they receive the holy Viaticum and Extreme Unction; they sigh and pray with those who are standing round; they often kiss the crucifix and press it to their bosoms, and depart with the exhortations and blessings of the priest still ringing in their ears. And do you call that a holy, Christian death? Ah, how little it costs to make saints? "We make saints in a day of those who contribute nothing to the process but a good will!" All we want is a day, an hour, nay, almost a few moments, and with one act of the will we become holy. I should not like to share the lot of those who are supposed to have thus died holy and Christian deaths. If nothing more were necessary to make a man die happy, then even the most wicked sinners are saved. For what Catholic is there who does not give some signs of repentance and receive the last Sacraments, if possible, when he feels the approach of death? If nothing more were required for a happy death, then all those who say "Lord! Lord!" should go to heaven; yet we have the express word of God to the contrary; and no one who has despised God during his life would be abandoned by God at the end, although that is again contrary to the word of God: "I will laugh in your destruction;" and all who in their lives turn a deaf ear to the voice of God should find him in that moment if they seek him, and should not die in the state of sin; but that, too, is against the word of God: "You shall seek me, and you shall die in your sin." Why has Christ described the way to heaven as difficult, narrow and hard to find? Why does he warn us so impressively? "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). And could I not think to myself: What is the use of going to so much trouble? I will live as I please, and indulge my senses as I see others doing; when I feel that death is at hand I can confess my sins, and go to heaven. Do not trust to such a confession, Holy Communion or Extreme Unction, if they are not preceded by a Christian life, for otherwise these Sacraments are not received at the proper time or with a sincere heart.

Ask the holy Fathers, those enlightened interpreters of Scripture, what they think of such a repentance. Ask St. Isidore; he calls it suspicious. Ask St. Bernard; he calls it rash and presumptuous. Ask SS. Cyprian, Ambrose, Gregory, Chrysostom, Thomas of Aquin; they laugh at such a repentance as utterly ridiculous, and, generally speaking, useless. "I dare not say," writes St. Augustine, "that one or the other individual who has repented on his death-bed is lost forever; but I cannot have much hope that he is in heaven. It is true that the confessions of such dying people are received by the Church; but I do not think they are much to be depended on. I do not trust in them. I do not wish to deceive you; but I do not trust in them. I can exhort such a man to repent; I can hear his confession and give him absolution; but I cannot say that the absolution will have any effect. I trust little in such confessions." Eusebius writes that when St. Jerome was dying he was asked to give his disciples a last lesson, and he said these words: "Of a hundred thousand men who have always led bad lives hardly one deserves pardon from God."

On what, then, do you ground your hope, oh, sinner! You who defer repentance to the last moment? Do you think that an exception will be made in your favor contrary to the general decrees of God and to what

experience teaches us of the death of sinners? Or do you imagine that you will be the one in a hundred thousand to whom God will give the special grace of conversion at the end? Will you trust your eternity to such a desperate chance? Ah, “Delay not to be converted to the Lord, and defer it not from day to day; for his wrath shall come on a sudden, and in the time of vengeance he will destroy thee” (Ecclus. 5 : 8, 9). Do not wait till the end; do penance at once, and that sincerely; at once amend your life, if you seriously intend escaping hell and going to heaven!

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