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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 haste to help us!

+ + + Jesus, Mary, Joseph + + +

*VOL. III* = THE GOOD CHRISTIAN

TENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Avoiding Vainglory in our Daily Actions

*“I say to you, this man went down into his house justified rather than the other.”* St. Luke 18: 54.

How different those two men entered into the temple, and how different they left it! What a diversity there is in the acts of the same two, and in the judgment of God upon those acts. The Pharisee’s works were in themselves good and meritorious; but his boasting and vainglory so destroyed their value that they were worth nothing in the sight of God. The publican’s works were in themselves bad and wicked; but by his humility he wiped out those works before God, and obtained grace from him. So much depends on the good intention by which we direct our actions to the honor and glory of God. Therefore there is nothing we should be more on our guard against in our actions than vainglory and love of praise, for that is the thief that steals away the merit of the holiest things we do, as I shall now show.

The glory that I am now speaking of consists in the appreciation and praise of men, namely, in this, that others when they see my actions, feel a secret gratification, and conceive a high opinion of me, wonder at what I do, and speak of me in terms of praise. It is called vainglory because it is a vain, deceitful, and useless thing that fades like the smoke before the wind. For either I do not know that men have such a good opinion of me and speak well of me; and in that case what better am I? Or else I do know of it, or see it or hear it; and even then what does it profit me? The good opinion or praise of others cannot either improve or damage what I have done. If the work is in itself undeserving of commendation, then the praise I receive for it is unjust, and I ought to be ashamed of it in my heart and soul. If the work appears to be commendable, even then the praise comes from men, who cannot see the workings of my heart nor the intention I had, and it is from that the whole goodness or wickedness of an action comes; consequently men cannot form a just judgment of the action.

If a skilful musician were to feel a secret gratification, and to boast and plume himself, because a dog hears his music and pricks up his ears at the sound of it; if a painter were to be proud of his picture because an ox passing by in the street happens to look at it, would not that be a vain, foolish, ridiculous love of praise? What does the dog know of music, or the ox of painting? Just as little do men understand of the virtue of another, because it is all interior, and cannot be recognized with certainty from any outward sign. How often do we not look on that which is really good and virtuous in itself as wicked and vicious, while, on the other hand, we regard that which is wicked and vicious as good and virtuous? How many hypocrites are Saints in the eyes of the world? How many Saints are held to be hypocrites? How many different opinions there were amongst the Jews regarding the holiness even of Jesus Christ himself, the Son of God! “And there was much murmuring among the multitude concerning him, for some said: he

is a good man. And others said: No, but he seduceth the people. Others said: This is the Christ. But some said: Doth the Christ come out of Galilee? So there arose a dissension among the people because of him” (St. John 7: 12, 41, 43). See how different the judgments of those men who at the same time heard the same doctrine from the lips of Christ, and saw the wonderful works and miracles he performed. Is it not, then, a vain and foolish thing to pride one’s self and take pleasure in praise that comes from ignorant men?

And from men, moreover, who nearly always pronounce judgment and speak of others according to their own passions and fancies. He who loves me sincerely and wishes well to me will praise and approve of everything I do. He who hates me will not be able to see any good in me: he will condemn and find fault with all my actions. The proud man esteems nothing worthy of praise but what he does himself. The simple-minded man wonders at everything he has not seen before. Even the greatest and noblest actions of others are like a splinter in the eye of the envious man. The flatterer, who praises me to my face and congratulates me, despises me and treats me with contempt behind my back. Thus each one looks at an action in the light shed upon it by his own passions. A judgment of that kind we cannot, of course, rely on.

Finally, the glory we seek from men exists mostly in our own fancy and imagination. We say to ourselves sometimes: Oh, what I am now doing is sure to be approved of by people; many will certainly wonder at it. But in reality people only laugh at and turn it into ridicule. A vain woman, who dresses beyond her station, and struts down the street in the latest fashions, imagines that the eyes of all are turned towards her with admiration, and that people are saying of her: See how beautifully she is dressed! She must be of a noble family. Yes, they talk of her by all means, and look at her with wonder, if you wish; but their talk and their wonder consist only in sarcasm and ridicule. Fie upon her! they exclaim; see how she marches down the street, as if we did not know where she comes from, nor what she is worth. What a vain, deceitful, unprofitable, nay, often disgraceful thing it is that they seek who strive to gain the praise of men! He who is greedy of praise can well be called a liar, for he lies to himself, since he imagines that he possesses some excellence which he really has not; or else he thinks that men respect and esteem him, when in reality their feeling towards him are of the contrary description.

But is it, then, pride and vanity to do a good action in presence of others? Or is it wicked and sinful? God forbid! Otherwise the Saviour of the world would have made a mistake in warning us to give good and edifying example: “So let your light shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father, who is in heaven” (St. Matthew 5: 16). Therefore we may allow men to see our good works, that they may thereby be encouraged to honor and praise God in heaven, from whom all that is good and praise-worthy comes as from its source. To do good in presence of others, when I foresee that they will think highly of me, and conceive an esteem for me, and speak in my praise, is that pride and vanity, and a sin? And if they really have a good opinion of me, and speak highly of what I do—nay, if they praise me to my face—is that a sin for me? No, not at all. As long as I give the whole honor and praise to him to whom alone they belong, that is, to the Lord God, it is a meritorious work. But to seek praise or esteem from men, or to rejoice in it, or extol myself on account of it, as if it belonged to me by right, that is the vice of vainglory. That sin can be committed *in the beginning of a work*: if, namely, I undertake anything that I may please men, or, earn their esteem or praise; this is clearly contrary to a good supernatural intention and spoils the whole work, because I make the good opinion of men the whole end and object of it. It can be committed *during the work*, although the work may have been begun with a good intention for God’s sake; if, namely, I think or imagine that it will please men, and win their esteem for me, and I continue to act with this motive. In this way the good intention is retracted and the goodness of the action interrupted. It can also be committed *after the work*, if I remember what I have done with self-complacency, and have a vain pleasure and joy in the praises I receive for it. By this the work is not destroyed in itself, nor is its merit lessened; yet the sin of vainglory is committed.

II. However it be committed, vainglory is the thief that steals away the merit from the holiest actions.

1. For, in the first place, while I am actually engaged in doing a service pleasing to God, I am taking from him what belongs to him, and what he values most and has specially reserved for himself. St. Gregory compares vainglory to a thief who offers his company to a traveller, pretending that he is going the same way whiling away the time meanwhile by pleasant conversation; but when the traveller feels most secure, the thief robs him of all his money. So do we act towards our Lord and God whenever we seek the vain praise of men in our actions; we accompany God through courtesy, as it were, under the pretext of doing him an acceptable service ; and meanwhile we rob him of his property. How so? There are two things in every good work: the honor and praise that belong to it, and the usefulness or merit of it, which latter consists in the increase of sanctifying grace during this life, and eternal glory in the next. This merit God leaves to us, but under the condition that we give the praise to him alone; just as a celebrated painter willingly gives to another the picture he has painted, first taking the precaution of writing his name under it, so that all may know it is his work; thus we see on some pictures the words, *Apelles pinxit*, *Rubens pinxit*. Or as two merchants make an agreement with each other in business to enter into partnership, the one contributing the money, the other taking on himself all the trouble of management: at stated times they settle their accounts, and divide the profits according to arrangement neither of them takes all the money that has been made.

My dear brethren, we carry on a business, so to speak, with the almighty God, and the principal thing we have to look to is our eternal salvation as the greatest gain we can make; neither God alone nor man alone carries on this business; it is the affair of both together. God supplies all the means of carrying it on, for it is by his help and grace that we are able to do good; man gives his labor and diligence. Now, whatever profit is made must be divided between God and man; God is satisfied with the honor alone, and that He will not consent to give to any one, as he assures us by the prophet Isaias : “I, the Lord, this is my name: I will not give my glory to another” (Is. 53 : 8). And St. Paul says: “To the king of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever” (1. Tim. 1: 17). But all the other proceeds of the business, namely, the increase of sanctifying grace and eternal happiness of heaven that follows thereon, God gives to man. Now he who wishes to take to himself what belongs to God, and to keep the honor of the actions, acts unjustly towards God and deserves to have the whole agreement cancelled, to be deprived of all shares in the profits, and therefore to lose all merits.

2. Another reason why even the holiest works and occupations are deprived of all their merit before God when they are performed through vainglory is that the supernatural intention is wanting, since it is nullified by seeking the praise of men. It is the intention that gives worth and merit to our actions; if it is wanting, all the rest is of no value, as Christ says: “The light of thy body is thy eye. If thy eye be single, thy whole body shall be lightsome. But if thy eye be evil, thy whole body shall be darksome” (St. Matthew 6: 22, 23). By the eye here is understood the intention, by which we consider beforehand, and as it were foresee, what we wish to do; by the body is understood the work, which follows the intention as the body follows the direction of the eye. Our Lord wishes to show that all actions take their light, their appearance, from the intention with which we perform them. If the latter is good, then the work, provided it is not forbidden, must also be good; if it is bad, then the work, too, must be bad; if the end to which the intention directs the act be perfect, then the work is one of perfection. This is what St. Paul means when he writes to the Romans: “For if the first fruit be holy, so is the lump also; and if the root be holy, so are the branches” (Rom. 11: 16). According to the root, so is the tree and its fruits ; if the root is rotten and corrupt, the tree can bear only worm-eaten, bad fruit; the fresher and healthier the root, the better the fruit. So also the goodness and holiness of actions consist in the intention as in their root; the better and holier that intention is, the more perfect and pleasing to God will the work be.

St. Paul speaking of charity and sanctifying grace, without which all good works are dead and of no help for salvation, says “If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal; and if I should have prophecy, and should know all mysteries, and all knowledge; and if I should have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing. And if I should distribute all my goods to feed the poor, and if I should deliver

my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing” (1. Cor. 13: 1, 2, 3). That is, if I am not in the state of grace while doing all these good works, they will not help me to heaven; they are and will remain dead works as long as they are not vivified by grace. The same words of the Apostle may be used almost without change when speaking of the good intention in our actions. If I fasted all the days of my life on bread and water; if I actually took the bread out of my own mouth to give to the poor out of Christian charity ; if I helped all the sick in the hospitals and visited prisoners with the greatest kindness and attention ; if I spent day and night in constant prayer and mortifications if I wearied myself going about the world converting heathens, heretics, and sinners; nay, if I performed all imaginable good works, but have not the good intention by which they should be directed to a supernatural end, it profiteth me nothing: they are of no use to my eternal salvation. And if I have, moreover, a bad intention, so that those works, otherwise good and holy in themselves, are directed to a bad end, they are turned into sinful and wicked actions.

Finally, if vainglory left our works as good and holy as they are in themselves, yet they would not have any merit or reward in heaven. Why? Because he who acts with such unworthy motives renounces the eternal reward, and seeks something else as the fruit of his labor, namely, the esteem, praise, and applause of men, which often exist merely in his own imagination; therefore, since he has no right to expect to be paid twice for the same work, he cannot hope for any other recompense from God, for whose honor and glory the work was not performed. This is according to the express words of our Lord in the Gospel of St. Matthew. “Take heed that you do not your justice before men, to be seen by them; otherwise you shall not have a reward of your Father who is in heaven” (St. Matthew 6: 1, 2). And when he speaks of the hypocrites in the synagogues of the Jews, who caused the trumpet to be sounded before them in the public streets, and then gave rich alms to the poor, that they might be honored by men, he adds this terrible sentence: “Amen I say to you, they have received their reward,” that is, the admiration and esteem of the people which they sought for by their alms-giving. Again, speaking of the hypocrites, “that love to stand and pray in the synagogues and corners of the street, that they may be seen by men” (St. Matthew 6: 5), he pronounces the same sentence: “Amen I say to you, they have received their reward.”

Poor mortal, whoever you may be, who seek for the praise of men in your actions, all our works of piety, your public prayers, Holy Communions, almsgiving, visiting the sick, attending processions, hearing sermons, the good advice you give others, and by which perhaps you have brought many to heaven—all that has already received its reward. Your wish was to make a great name for yourself before the world, to be looked on as pious and holy, to be praised, esteemed, thought much of; very well, says God, who knows the depths of your heart, very well, then, be it done as you wish. Flatter yourself with the idea that you have secured what you so long for; imagine that the world wonders at your extraordinary works, and holds a high opinion of you. Take your reward and go; I can do nothing more for you; you have already received what you sought for. If you ask me to reward you in eternity for those works, I will answer you in the words that Abraham spoke to the rich man who was tortured in hell, and asked him for a drop of water to cool his tongue: “Son, remember that thou didst receive good things in thy life-time” (St. Luke 16 : 25). Heavenly glory is the reward I give for those good works that have not been paid for in time, and which still can claim a price; but you have already received payment, and now you must be satisfied.

Ah, Christians, what a miserable, wretched, unhappy payment that is! Must he not be foolish, nay, stone-blind, who seeks for the empty sound of human praise and acts through vainglory while by the very same works he loses an eternal treasure in heaven? Poor, blind, and miserable man, you are indeed a very bad merchant and man of business. You are like the wild Indians who in days gone by used to give away their gold and silver ornaments for a few needles, or beads, or tobacco pipe. But you are even more foolish, for you exchange the good works by which you may purchase heaven for the vain, imaginary, useless praise of men. Like the dog in the fable, you snap at the shadow, and thereby lose the solid piece of meat that you really had possession of; like the spider, you make a web out of your own entrails to catch a miserable fly.

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