



# CATHOLIC CHRONICLE.

VOL. I. MONTREAL, FRIDAY, OCTOBER 4, 1850. NO. 8.

## DISCOURSES TO MIXED CONGREGATIONS.

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### DISCOURSE VII.

#### PERSEVERANCE IN GRACE.

There is no truth, my brethren, which Holy Church is more earnest in impressing upon us than that our salvation from first to last is the gift of God. It is true indeed that we merit eternal life by our works of obedience; but that those works are meritorious of such a reward, this takes place, not from their intrinsic worth, but from the free appointment and bountiful promise of God; and that we are able to do them at all, is the simple result of His grace. That we are justified is of His grace; that we have the dispositions for justification is of His grace; that we are able to do good works, when justified, is of His grace; and that we persevere in those good works is of His grace. Not only do we actually depend on His power from first to last, but our very destinies depend on His sovereign pleasure and inscrutable counsel. He holds the arbitration of our future in His hands; without an act of His will, independent of ours, we should not have been brought into the grace of the Catholic Church; and without a further act of His will, though we are now members of it, we shall not be brought on to the glory of the kingdom of heaven. Though a soul justified can merit eternal life, yet neither can it merit to be justified, nor can it merit to remain justified to the end; not only is a state of grace the condition and the life of all merit, but grace brings us into that state of grace, and grace continues us in it; and thus, as I began by saying, our salvation from first to last is the gift of God.

All this is perfectly consistent with our free will, because Holy Church teaches also that we are really free and responsible. Every one upon earth might, without any verbal evasion, be saved, as far as God's assistances are concerned. Every man born of Adam's seed, simply and truly, might save himself, if he would, and might will to save himself; for grace is given to every one enough for this. Why it is, however, that in spite of this real freedom of man's will, our salvation still depends so absolutely on God's good pleasure, is unrevealed; divines have devised various explanations of it, which have severally been received by some, and not received by others, but which do not concern us now. How man is able fully and entirely to do his will, yet God accomplishes His own supreme will also, is hidden from us, as it is hidden from us how God created out of nothing, or how He foresees the future; it is one of those "hidden things which belong unto the Lord our God;" but "what are revealed," as the inspired writer goes on to say, "are for us and our children even for ever-lasting;" and those revealed truths are, on the one hand, that our salvation depends on ourselves, on the other, that it depends on God. Did we not depend on ourselves, we should become careless and reckless, nothing we did or did not do having any bearing on our salvation; did we not depend on God, we should be presumptuous and self-sufficient. I began by telling you, my brethren, and I shall proceed in what is to come, more distinctly to tell you, that you depend upon God; but such admonitions imply also your dependence upon yourselves; for, did not your salvation in some sufficient sense depend on yourselves, what would be the use of appealing to you not to forget your dependence on God? It is, because you have so great a share in your own salvation, that it avails, that it is pertinent, to speak to you of God's part in it.

God is the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending, as of all things, so of our salvation. We should have lived and died every one of us in the absence of all saving knowledge of Him, but for a gift which we could not do any thing ourselves to secure, had we lived ever so well,—but for His grace; and now that we have known him, and have been cleansed from our sin by Him, it is quite certain that we cannot do any thing, even with the help of grace, to purchase for ourselves perseverance in justice and sanctity, though we live ever so well. His grace begins the work, His grace also finishes it; and now I am going to speak to you of His finishing it; I mean of the necessity under which we lie of His finishing it, else it will never be finished, or rather will be reversed; I am going to speak to you of the gift of perseverance in grace, its extreme preciousness, and our utter hopelessness, in spite of all that we are, without it.

It is this gift which our Lord speaks of when He prays His Father for His disciples, before He departs from them: "Holy Father, keep in Thy Name those whom Thou hast given Me; . . . I ask not that

Thou take them out of the world, but that Thou preserve them from evil." And St. Paul intends it when he declares to the Philippians that "He who had begun a good work" in his disciples, "would perfect it unto the day of Christ Jesus." St. Peter too, when he says in like manner, that "God, who had called his brethren into His eternal glory, would perfect, confirm, and consolidate them." And so the Prophet in the Psalms prays, that God would "perfect his walking in His paths, that his steps might not be moved;" and the Prophet Jeremias declares in God's Name, "I will put My fear in their hearts, that they draw not back from Me." In these and many other passages the blessing spoken of is the gift of perseverance, and now I will tell you more distinctly how and why it is necessary.

This is what we find to be the case, not only in matters of religion, but of this world, viz., that let a person do a thing ever so well, the chance is that he will not be able to do it a number of times without a mistake. Let a person be ever so good an accountant, he will add up a sum wrongly now and then, though you could not guess beforehand when or why he was to fail. Let him get by heart a number of lines ever so perfectly, and say them accurately over, yet it does not follow that he will say them a dozen times and be accurate throughout. So it is with our religious duties; we may be able to keep from every sin in particular, as the temptation comes, but this does not hinder its being certain that we shall not in fact keep from all sins, though that "all" is made up of those particular sins. This is how the greatest Saints come to commit venial sins, though they have grace sufficient to keep them from any venial sin whatever. It is the result of human frailty: nothing could keep the Saints from such falls, light as they are, but a special prerogative, and this, the Church teaches us, has been granted to the Blessed Virgin, and apparently to her alone. Now venial sins do not separate from God, and are permitted by the Giver of all grace for a good purpose, to humble us, and to give us an incentive to works of penance. No exemption from venial sin is given us, because it is not necessary for us to be exempted: on the other hand it is most necessary that we should be preserved from mortal sins, yet here too that very difficulty besets us in our warfare with them which meets us in the case of venial. Here too, though a man may have grace sufficient to keep him clear of all mortal sins whatever, taken one by one, we may prophesy surely, that the hour will come, sooner or later, when he will neglect and baffle that grace, unless he has some further gift bestowed on him to guard him against himself. He needs grace to use grace, he needs something over and above, to secure his faithfulness to what he has already. And he needs it imperatively, for since one mortal sin separates from God, he is in immediate risk of his salvation, if he has it not. This additional gift is called the gift of perseverance; and it consists in an ever watchful superintendence of us, on the part of our All-merciful Lord, removing temptations which He sees will be fatal to us, succoring us at those times when we are in particular peril, whether from our negligence or other cause, and ordering the course of our life so, that we may die when we are in a state of grace. And, since it is so simply necessary for us, God grants it to us; nay, did He not, no one could be saved; He grants it to us, though He does not grant even to Saints the prerogative of avoiding every venial sin; He grants it, out of His bounty, to our prayers, though we cannot merit it by any thing we do or say to Him, even with the aid of His grace.

What a lesson of humility and watchfulness have we in this doctrine as now explained! It is one ground of humiliation, that, do what we will, strive as we will, we cannot escape from venial sin while we are on earth. Though the aids which God gives us are sufficient to enable us to live without sin, yet our infirmity of will and of attention is a match for them, and we do not do in fact that which we might do. And again, what is not only humbling, but even frightful and appalling, we are in danger of mortal sin as well as in certainty of venial; and the only reason why we are not in certainty of mortal is, that an extraordinary gift is given to those who supplicate for it, to secure them from mortal, though no such gift is given to secure them from venial. In spite of the presence of grace in our souls, in spite of the actual assistances given us, we owe any hope we have of heaven, not to that inward grace simply, nor to those assistances, but to a supplementary mercy which protects us against ourselves, rescues us from occasions of sin, strengthens us in our hour of danger, and ends our days at that very time, perhaps cut short our life in order to secure a time when no mortal sin has separated us from God. Nothing we are, nothing we do, is any guarantee to us that this supplementary mercy has been accorded to us; we cannot know till the end; all we know is, that God has helped us hitherto, and we trust He will help us still. But yet the ex-

perience of what He has already done is no promise that He will do more; our present religiousness need not be the consequence of the gifts of perseverance as bestowed upon us; it may have been intended merely to prompt and enable us to pray earnestly and continually for that gift. There are men who, had they died at a particular time, would have died the death of Saints, and who lived to fall. They lived on here to die eternally. O dreadful thought! Never be you offended, my brethren, or overwhelmed, when you find the good and gentle, or the zealous and useful, cut down and taken off in the midst of their course; it is hard to bear, but who knows but he is taken away *a facie multitudine*, "from the presence of evil," from the evil to come? "He was snatched away," as the wise man says, "lest evil should change his reason, or error deceive his soul." For the fascination of vanity clouds what is good, and the fickleness of concupiscence perverts the guileless mind. He was perfected in a brief space, and so fulfilled a length of time, for his soul was pleasing to God, whereupon he hastened to bring him out of the midst of iniquity. The people see and do not understand, nor lay up such things in their hearts; that God's grace and mercy is unto His Saints, and His regard unto His elect.

Bad is it to bear, when such a one is taken away; cruel to his friends, sad even to strangers, and a surprise to the world; but O, how much better, how happy so to die, instead of being reserved to sin! You may wonder how sin was possible in him, my brethren; he had so many graces, he had lived and matured in them so long; he had overcome so many temptations. He had struck his roots deeply, and spread abroad his branches on high. One grace grew out of another; and all things in him were double one against another. He seemed from the very completeness of his sanctity, which enriched him on every side, to defy assault, and to be proof against impression. He, if any one, could have said with the proud Church in the Apocalypse, "I am wealthy and enriched, and have need of nothing;" that he had started well, seemed a reason why he should go on; strength would lead to strength, and merit to merit; as a flame increases and sweeps along and round about, as soon as, and for the very reason that it is once kindled, so he promised himself a destiny of greater triumph as time proceeded. He was fit to scale heaven by an inherent power, which, though at first of grace, yet, when once given, became not of grace, but of claim for more grace, as by the action of a law, and the process of a series, in which grace and merit alternated, man meriting and meriting, and the God of grace being forced to give and give, if He would be true to His promise. Thus we might look at Him, and think we had already in our hands all the data of a great and glorious and infallible conclusion, and deny that a reverse or a fall was possible. My brethren, there was once an Eastern king, in his day the richest of men; and a Grecian sage came to visit him, and, having seen all his glory and his majesty, was pressed by this poor child of vanity to say whether he was not the happiest of men. To whom the wise man did but reply, that he should wait till he saw the end. So it is as regards spiritual wealth; since Almighty God, in spite of His ample promises, and His faithful abidance to them, has not put out of His own hands the issues of life and death; the end comes from Him as well as the beginning. When He has once given grace, He has not therefore simply made over to the creature His own salvation. The creature can merit much; but as he could not merit the grace of conversion, neither can he merit the gifts of perseverance. From first to last he is dependent on Him who made him; he cannot be extortionate with Him, he cannot turn His bounty to the prejudice of the Bountiful; he may not exalt himself, he dare not presume, but "if he thinketh he standeth, let him take heed lest he fall." He must watch and pray, he must fear and tremble, he must "chastise his body and bring it into subjection, lest, after he has preached to others, he himself should be reprobate."

But I need not go to heathen history for an instance in point; Scripture furnishes one a thousand times more apposite and more impressive. Who was so variously gifted, so inwardly endowed, so laden with external blessings, as Solomon? on whom are lavished, as on him, the titles and the glories of the Eternal Son, God and man? The only aspect of Christ's adorable person, which he does not represent, does but bring out to us the peculiarity of his privileges. He does not symbolize Christ's sufferings; he was neither a Priest, nor like David his father, had he been a man of strife, and toil, and blood. Every thing which betokens mortality, every thing which savors of the fall, is excluded from our idea of Solomon. He is as if an ideal of perfection; the king of peace, the builder of the temple, the father of a happy people, the heir of an empire, the wonder of all nations; a prince, yet a sage; palace-bred, yet taught in the schools; a student, yet a man of the world; deeply

read in human nature, yet learned too in animals and plants. He has the crown without the cross, peace without war, experience without suffering, and this not in the mere way of men, or from the general providence of God, but from His very hands, by a particular designation, and as the result of inspiration. He obtained it when young, and where shall we find any thing so touching in the whole of Scripture as the circumstances of the grant? who shall accuse him of want of religious fear and true love, whose dawning is so beautiful? When the Almighty appeared to him in a dream on his coming to the throne and said, "Ask what I shall give thee;" "O Lord God," he made answer, "Thou hast made Thy servant to reign in the stead of David my father; and I am a little child, and know not my going out and my coming in. And Thy servant is in the midst of the people which Thou hast chosen, a vast people, which cannot be numbered or counted for multitude." Accordingly, he asked for nothing else but the gift of wisdom to enable him to govern his people well; and as his ward for so excellent a petition, he received, not only the wisdom for which he had asked, but those other gifts for which he had asked not: "And as the Lord said unto Solomon, Because thou hast asked this thing, and hast not petitioned for many days, nor riches, nor the lives of thine enemies, but hast asked for thyself wisdom to discern judgment, behold, I have done to thee according to thy words, and I have given to thee a wise and understanding heart, so that none has been like thee before thee, nor shall rise after thee. Moreover; these things, which thou hast not asked, I have given to thee, to wit, riches and glory, so that none has been like to thee among kings in all former days."

Rare inauguration to his greatness! the most splendid of monarchs owes nothing to injustice, or to cruelty, or to violence, or to treachery, nothing to human art or to human arm, that he is so powerful, so famous, and so wise; it is a divine gift which endowed him within, which clothed him without. What was wanting to his blessedness? seeking God in his youth, growing up year after year in sanctity, fortifying his faith by wisdom, and his obedience by experience, and his aspirations by habit, what shall he not be in the next world, who is so glorious in this? He is a Saint ready made; he is in his youth what others are in their age; he is fit for heaven ere others begin the way heavenward: why should he delay? what lacks he yet? why tarry the wheels of his chariot? why does he remain on earth, for a good old age, when he has already won his crown, and may be carried away in happy youth, and be securely taken into God's keeping, not with the common throng of holy souls, but like Enoch and Elias, up on high, in some fit secret paradise till the day of redemption? Alas! he remains on earth to show us that there might be one thing lacking amidst that multitude of graces; to show that though there be all faith, all hope, all love, all wisdom; that though there be an exuberance of merits, it is all a vanity, it is only a woe in the event if one gift be wanting,—the gift of perseverance! He was in his youth, what others hardly are in age; well were it, had he been in his end, what the feeblest of God's servants is in his beginning!

His great father, whose sanctity had been wrought into him, by many a fight with Satan, and who knew how difficult it was to persevere, when his death drew near, as if in prophecy rather than in prayer, had spoken thus of and to his son, and his people: "God said to me, Thou shalt not build a house to My Name, because thou art a man of war, and hast shed blood. Solomon, thy son, shall build My house and My courts; for I have chosen him to Me for a son, and I will be to him a father; and I will establish his kingdom even for ever, if he shall persevere to do My precepts and judgments, as at this day. And thou, Solomon, my son, know the God of thy father, and serve Him with a perfect heart and a willing mind, for if thou shalt forsake Him, He will cast thee off for ever." And then, when he had collected together the precious materials for that house which he himself was not to build, and was resigning the kingdom to his son, "I know," he said, "O my God, that Thou triest the heart, and lovest simplicity, wherefore have I in the simplicity of my heart, and with joy offered to Thee all these things; and Thy people too, which are present here, have I seen with great joy to offer to Thee their gifts. O Lord God of Abraham, and Isaac, and Israel, our fathers, keep for ever this wish of their hearts, and let that abide in them always for the worship of Thee. And to Solomon also, my son, give a perfect heart; that he may keep Thy commandments, and Thy testimonies, and Thy ceremonies, and do all things; and build the building, for thee which I have prepared the charges." Such had been the dim foreboding of his father, fearing perhaps for his son from the very abundance of that son's prosperity. And in truth, it is not good for man to live in so cloudless a splendor, and so unchequered a heaven.