

FIVE MINUTE SERMON

BY REV. WILLIAM DEMOUY, D. D.

THIRD SUNDAY AFTER
PENTECOST

THE CHURCH AND THE SINNER

"So I say to you, there shall be joy before the angels of God upon one sinner doing penance." (Luke xv. 10.)

Man's weakness is well known to God; and it is recognized by Him in His great mercy. He made us and knows better than any one else how far we are from perfection, how untrained are our passions, and how terrible is the fight we are forced to make against the enemies of our salvation. It is not His fault that this is so, nor is it altogether our own; but we must take much of the responsibility, if we neglect to enter the struggle for betterment. God does not wish us to go into this fight unarmed and as weaklings, such as we are by nature, but He supplies us with weapons and strengthens us. This is all done by His divine grace, and by its power, when we do our utmost, victory will be certain.

We should always bear in mind, however, that man, especially in his youth when he is without experience and when the battle is hardest to wage, is liable to forget God's aid or not to place the proper reliance upon it. This is especially true of those whose religious training has been neglected. It is useless to tell the young that they must fight, unless we also tell them how to arm themselves where to obtain assistance. Merely to keep away from harm is not enough, for besides the enemies about us in the world, there is also one within us. The system proposed to treacherous youth outside of the Catholic Church is simply a negative one. The results achieved amount to nothing, in the majority of instances, because the young are not supplied with the proper weapons with which to withstand the enemy.

So it happens that much of the wickedness on the part of many is not so wilful as it may first appear. Nature untrained, unconquered, led them to excesses and the formation of a habit; and then, as a habit becomes so strong in nature, they find it too difficult to rid themselves of it. We do not say that these poor sinners are to be excused, for conscience tells them of their wrongdoing—at least after they are well aware of the danger in which they stand—but we should have patience with them. We should exert every effort to bring them back to God, and have them fortified with His all-powerful aid. In some cases they may seem to be degenerates, or beyond a possibility of being brought to a duty they never before performed. However, there is always hope. They may be even as a Paul or an Augustine in their sinful life, but, like them, they can become children of God after a sincere conversion.

There can be no one who is not deserving of consideration in regard to his spiritual life. The world we live in, after all, was created in order to save sinful man. This earth is not now as it was when our first parents were yet in their innocence. God placed man in another sphere, as it were, as we are today, but solely in order that he might be saved. Christ came among us and suffered and died for sinners, the greatest as well as the smallest. God gives to sinful man as many material blessings as He gives to saints. He allows him to live on even though man is continually defying Him. Why does He do all this? To give man an opportunity of saving himself. Only when hope is lost, is man made to answer to God, with no further chance to save himself. God's mercy is in truth above the clouds, and with it He yearns to save the sinner.

The attitude of very many people toward sinners, is vastly different from the attitude of God toward His erring children. Many are slow to show mercy, and unwilling to forgive if another has injured them. How little do they rejoice when one who has deserted the paths of wickedness, returns to righteousness. Often his sincerity is doubted and his conduct regarded with suspicion. It is a truth no one can well deny that we always expect God to act mercifully with us, yet we often act quite differently with our neighbor. How easily do we forget that such is not the spirit of Christ! His sacred body often rests upon our tongues, when His spirit is not mirrored in our souls. Above all the qualities of Christ His mercy and love for the sinner was most conspicuous. His words seem to have been sweetest and His thoughts kindest—if we may compare His qualities—when He dealt with sinners.

Through God's mercy alone can any of us be saved? We know He will not deny mercy to us if we struggle perseveringly for justice. Desperation would ever stare us in the face, could we not raise our eyes upward and behold the merciful countenance of our Heavenly Father. Why should we assume an attitude different from that of the Almighty, when we consider the sins and faults of our neighbors? Perhaps they are not—in truth they cannot be—worthy of praise, but they always deserve consideration and mercy. They were weak. Perhaps they fell in soul, and would have fallen in body had it been weakened. They are not to be encouraged by being excused, but a gentle warning should be given them, and a helping hand offered to

assist them to the confines of God's territory. Greater love than this no one can show for his neighbor. Because the world and former friends have manifested no interest in a prodigal's return and have shown no mercy to him, many a sinner in despair has plunged himself into eternity. When adverse winds are about to shipwreck our neighbor, then above all we must offer him safety. His sins may have brought him to the brink of perdition; let us bring him to the solid earth of hope. Have you ever met one in sin plunged to the lowest depths of despair, whom you could not have helped a little way on his journey towards God's forgiveness? Kindness and compassion lead to liberty; the whip drives to prison and bondage. Beauty of mind, heart, and body always will attract, whereas uncompromising and exacting severity will repel. The poor sinner yearns for the good, the pure, and the noble. If you can help him toward them, do not refuse to aid him. Your generosity and sacrifice will be rewarded.

Real mercy, true compassion, and love for the sinner are shown most perfectly in this world by the Catholic Church in the tribunal of penance. Day after day the gentle voice of the Saviour, re-echoed through His priests, reaches the ears of the poor sinner. "Go in peace and sin no more; thy sins are forgiven thee." The erring foot is placed on the right path, the poisoned tongue cured, and the stained soul purified. Not only does our kind mother, the Church, not cast the sinner away, but she even takes him to her breast, and allows him to hear the loving beats of her encouraging, forgiving heart. "Come and be forgiven," is her cry; not "Go and be lost." Is our attitude as individuals in any way similar? If not, where is our mercy? Show it in future, that God every day, but especially on judgment day, may show it to you.

GENERAL INTENTION
FOR JULYRECOMMENDED AND BLESSED
BY HIS HOLINESS POPE
PIUS XI.

THE LAY RETREAT MOVEMENT

Is there such a thing? If so, why so? What does it signify? Let us take up these queries in succession. To the first question we answer yes, and the thing is of very respectable antiquity as well. Thirty-five hundred years ago, while aiding the Israelites out of Egyptian bondage, Moses, their divinely appointed guide and lawgiver, made a retreat on Mount Sinai. At the conclusion of that memorable event, the countenance of the retreatant shone before the expectant people with a radiance which was symbolic of the spiritual refreshment and vigor that his soul had gained during those days of solitude and prayer. Such was the happy result of the first retreat recorded in Scripture. Thanks to it, Moses was strengthened in his enormously difficult work of leading a stubborn, stiff-necked, and sensual people away from the doom of slavery and the contamination of a most degrading form of idolatry. Since then, similar prodigies have resulted times beyond number from the due use of similar means.

The Church was born in surroundings as antagonistic to her holy mission as was the public and private life of the Egyptians to the spiritual progress of the Jews whom they had enslaved. Little wonder, then, that from the cradle days of Christianity myriads of chosen souls sought by retiring from the haunts of men that blessed solitude in which they could devote themselves uninterruptedly and heroically to the service of God and their personal sanctification. The Carmelites are the spiritual descendants of solitaries; and the official title of the Augustinians, which is Hermits of St. Augustine, harks back to the same venerable origin. St. Benedict observed the retreat in a sublime manner. Was he a priest? The wisest Benedictine will hesitate before answering the question. Certain it is that we know of no distinctively priestly act ever performed by him.

But here we are concerned with houses of retreat intended for temporary occupancy by the laity. This narrows down our question, it is true, but, far from lessening its importance, it enhances it; for ecclesiastical and religious are governed by special provisions of the canon law and of their various dioceses and institutes. We speak of and for retreats for the laity whose life is led in a world of rush and struggle. We speak of retreats for women as well as for men; if we name but the latter it is for the sake of brevity, since both observe the same general procedure.

We should like to know something about the first man of the world who laid aside worldly cares for a short period in order to concentrate his attention on his spiritual affairs. Alas! his name has not come down to us; but we know that from the earliest days of the Church laymen were wont to betake themselves to religious houses and there spend some days in prayer and penitential exercises. Such houses, however, did not always have accommodations for so worthy a purpose, especially when the practice had become more widely known and more generally esteemed.

The necessary consequence, therefore, was the building of the first house of retreats for this special purpose at Vannes in Brittany, in the year 1628. Such houses are now spread over the whole earth, in Europe, North and South America, Asia, Australia, and even in distant Madagascar. Yes, there are houses of retreat; but there should be and will be many more.

Why are there houses of retreat? Almost unwittingly we have given a pretty fair answer to this second question, while satisfying all legitimate and praiseworthy curiosity with regard to the first. It is common enough to see a place of business where people streamed in and out from morning till night now standing silent with locked doors and curtains down. No prospective customers enter, and no parcels are brought out. A conspicuous sign tells the story: Closed for inventory. The dependents and clerks, the managers and the proprietors are behind those darkened display windows, but they are far from idle. The stock is being examined and appraised. Some is out of style, some shows signs of too much careless handling or of having been long untouched. All such are doomed to the "bargain counter."

Some stock has just become seasonable, and for some fickle fashion is just beginning to claim. These will be displayed as "novelties," or "all the vogue." The staff of the store are not simply amusing themselves. All are engaged in examining, sorting, and valuing on the prosaic basis of dollars and cents. What gain has the business produced? How to check the loss? How to sell the profits? These are vital questions to a business man.

As we write, we take a glance at the shelf-clock. A fortnight ago, its tick, tock, was going on in all its dull monotonous sameness, but the hands began to lag behind at the rate of ten minutes a day. The clock was of little use for marking the exact passing of time, but it was too good to be tossed aside into the rubbish heap. A trip to the watchmaker and lo! it has regained its former good estate.

Happy indeed is he who can lay aside his daily cares for a short time and go to the hills or to the valleys, to the lakes or to the rivers, or to the vast, gloomy North woods, where his wearied body and ragged nerves may rest and recover under the gentle, restorative processes which Dame Nature provides for the tired spirit. He returns with fresh energy and zest to his bench or to his office and is eager to join once more in the battle of life.

Let us make the application of our parables. The dignity of human nature depends on reason. Conscience is but reason's discipline on what is morally good or morally bad. Neither my fancy nor my neighbor is my conscience. It may be stifled; it may be cultivated. In this it resembles a liking for oratory, or an ear for music, or a taste for drawing. The light of faith comes to our assistance. A life in accord with reason, or even in accord with faith, is very hard to live, for we are a prey to the senses.

In time of great bodily pain or severe temporal trials, it is doubly hard, though highly meritorious; while in time of youth, robust health and affluence, we venture to aver that it is trebly hard and correspondingly meritorious, for in this case the tendency is to patronize faith as something good and desirable, but not to cleave to it as to something vital. "Without faith it is impossible to please God" by a life that heaps up a heavenly treasure. But this saving faith must not be a mere half-hearted vision of distant hills through the haze of autumn; it must be a living actuality, instinct with a directing and heartening influence over our daily lives.

Not simply our actions and words, especially when we are off our guard, but even our thoughts and reveries or day-dreams give highly significant indications of our spiritual condition. For example, even when not actively engaged in their customary duties, the instructor in Battenberg and the football coach live in different thought-worlds.

One passion, if it escapes the control of conscience, suffices to enslave, enslave, and kill the soul. The light of faith, always bright in itself, cannot pierce the murky mist that sin raises between the soul and duty; the mind becomes self-blinded and the heart grows hard in evil. Mechanical prayers and perfunctory confessions expose and dispose the soul to this very grave spiritual catastrophe. And, be it said in passing, just here we have a clear and sufficient reason for certain defections for which there was no satisfactory outward explanation, no symptom in the known history of the spiritual suicide.

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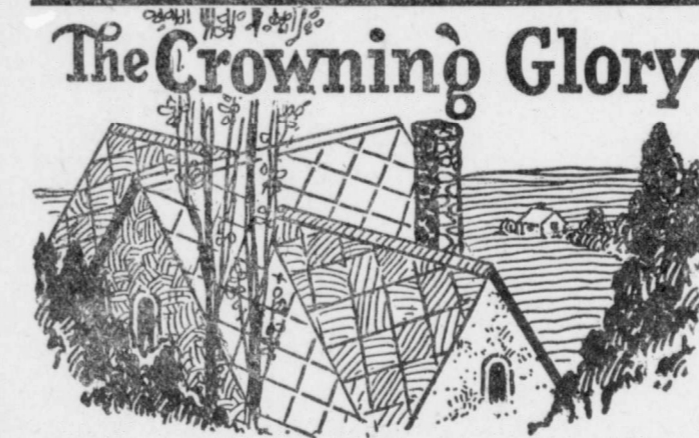
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