

FIVE MINUTE SERMON

BY REV. WILLIAM DEMOUY, D. D.

FIRST SUNDAY AFTER
EPIPHANY

OBEDIENCE TO GOD'S LAW

"When Jesus was twelve years old, they went up to Jerusalem, according to the custom of the feast, and having fulfilled the days, when they returned, the Child Jesus remained in Jerusalem, and His parents knew it not." (Luke II, 42.)

"When Jesus was twelve years old, they went up to Jerusalem, according to the custom of the feast." Who will not be struck with admiration for the Holy Family, when reading these lines in the Gospel? Jesus the new Law-giver, the very Son of God, equal to His Father in all things, obeys His earthly parents, Joseph and Mary, and goes to Jerusalem to celebrate the accustomed feast of the season. Soon new feasts would be celebrated, but He had not as yet abolished the customs and ceremonies of the Old Law, and so long as it existed, it was to be obeyed. He was not bound by any law, but as His Father had ordained, at the present time He wished His parents to act and Himself to obey. There is more in this instance of our Divine Lord's actions than the world of today is wont to follow. Here is an exemplification of absolute obedience to the fulfillment of God's law; the world would like to obey as it pleases and fulfill if it pleases. The spirit of regard for God's commands and subjection to them is not as reverential as it should be, save among a very limited class. If we consider the scene laid before us in this Gospel and the ordinary behavior of this generation, we cannot help noticing the amazing contrast.

The lesson taught us by the Holy Family should be learned in its entirety. We, as Catholics, above all the rest of the world, still retain a great reverence for God's law and a more or less conscientious obligation to fulfill it in every minute particular. Some may be swayed a little by the spirit around them, but they are not a majority. The most delicate regard for God's law and the purest conception of its obligations exist among the true members of Christ's Church; but, in the midst of customary practices and beliefs, one must be strong in order to be faithful to convictions and prompt in duty. A study must be made of God's law, to some extent at least, and unceasing prayer for perseverance must ever ascend to Him who gives faith to believe and the grace to live accordingly.

The world has come to consider that wherever a reform is needed, a change is required in practically every particular. As a rule this is true of any work of man that has deteriorated or run into decay. The works of man are necessarily fallible and imperfect. He has but limited intelligence and power, and can as a consequence attain but limited perfection, even in the greatest and best of his accomplishments and institutions. When there comes failure, as is often the case, his successors consider him to have made a mistake, and their method of reform is to destroy the original and to substitute something new. Men have endeavored to extend this method to the works and laws of God, and, of course, have erred. We must always bear in mind that God's works are perfect—man can not improve them in any respect whatsoever. God, in His infinite intelligence and with power absolutely unlimited, does what is best in the best way. When it appears that His works are decaying—or His laws unsuited—it should be only a sounding note that man is failing in his obedience to God's eternal decrees and in his respect for them and is losing the right conception of God and His works.

When a difficulty as regards the fulfillment of God's law seems to exist, we must concede that disordered men are to blame, and not that the Maker's commands no longer are suited to the world. We do not speak of physical disability now, but of that worldly difficulty so many are accustomed to make capital of and use by saying that the world is not what it was formerly. Be that as it may, no change incompatible with God's establishments is lawful. His institution—the Church—must remain the same from the foundation on the first Pentecost, to its end on the last day of the world. If a reform ever was needed, it was not in the Church, nor in her practices and laws as given to her by God, but among the people claiming adherence to her, or standing afar from her and loudly denouncing her impracticability and her superstitious rites. They are like the Pharisees who claimed that Christ worked through the devil. How fortunate should man consider himself in having a Church that is infallible, unchanging, God has established! What would be if we had to submit to the ideas of man in matters of religion? What are the religions of man today but the products of disordered brains, or the results of violations of the sacred laws of charity? According to some modern opinions, any one may establish his own religion; but as a matter of fact, many do without any religion at all, as this course leaves them much freer.

There never will be unity in the world, or one religion among men, until all realize that God has established a Church which can

never change, and never grow old. Her practices and laws are binding in conscience on all occasions and during our entire lifetime. She will remain so, until God Himself changes her, which will never be. She can not be improved upon; our notions of reform regarding her and of her betterment are but signs of our pride and our unwillingness to subject ourselves to her. The example set us by the Holy Family is the one to follow. There should be no question of righteousness, no discussion of opportuneness, but willing obedience. If we do not obey, we shall be destroyed spiritually. As we must obey the legitimate demands of nature in order to live physically, so must we obey the demands of our Church in order to live and thrive spiritually. We need not expect to face God on judgment day and find His smile benign, if during life we have found fault with and disobeyed His laws as given us through His Church. Imagine our confusion in the realization that we had made a futile attempt to reform His Church, and had endeavored to change things after our own fancies, rather than conform to His immutable wishes. What we have, God has given us; consequently it is good. If it does not seem to us to be what it should be, let us conscientiously examine our own selves, and we shall find that it is we who are not what we should be.

TWO NOVELISTS ON
RELIGION

In the current issue of The Cosmopolitan, Rupert Hughes contributes an article on "Why I Quit Going to Church," which the editor says "may irritate some readers into going back to church."

The article may irritate—that appears to be the intention with which it was written—but it will also sadden. The disparity of the finite in discussing the Infinite has its pathetic side. Mr. Hughes boasts that on leaving college he became "assistant editor of a great history of the world in twenty-five volumes." His equipment for the position must have been about equal to that which he brings to the discussion of religion. He began to go to the library and read, and the result was similar to the disturbing experience of the Protestant Bishop Colenso as recorded by Punch:

A bishop there was of Natal
Who a Zulu once took for a pal;
Said the Zulu: "See here,
Ain't the Pentateuch queer?"
Which converted My Lord of Natal.

Bishop Colenso produced "The Pentateuch and Book of Joshua Critically Examined." Mr. Hughes undertakes to criticize the whole Bible from Genesis to the Apocalypse. But what he really criticizes are certain conceptions of the Bible which he had absorbed in youth. In school and at college he had been taught to study philology in the works of experts—those who had given their lives to the discovery of the origin of words and so had become authorities; he had been encouraged at the same time to interpret for himself the Word of Words and to scorn all authority in the study of theology.

What system of theology he evolved—if system it may be called—is disclosed in the diatribe he now delivers in discarding it. He makes discoveries which to him are as startlingly original as were those of Colenso's pupil the Zulu mind. He raises the question of Christ's brothers and sisters, in blissful ignorance that the queries which he propounds were advanced and answered eighteen hundred years ago. He plagiarizes Ingersoll as though there were still merit in arguments which were pulverized long since by Father Lambert.

That the popular novelist turned critic of religion should have no real understanding of that which he undertakes to criticize is not strange. On the contrary it is perfectly plain and comprehensible. In exalting the materialistic concept of life and seeking to explain its many mysteries in terms of materialism, he is but following the example set by many Protestant preachers who wonder why their churches are empty.

Under the title "Vulgarizing Religion," another novelist and the father of a novelist, W. J. Dawson, who is likewise a minister of the Gospel, writes for the September issue of The Century Magazine an article which contains a definition of religion which Mr. Hughes would do well to ponder. There is nothing abstruse or involved in the assertion that religion predicated "the perception of a spiritual universe with which man has authentic relations." This religion, says Dr. Dawson, "cannot be reduced to severely logical terms without the destruction of its finer essences." Mr. Hughes may scoff at this assertion, but his fellow writer furnishes a forceful illustration. Even poetry and art, he explains, which are akin in some degree to religion, make their chief appeal by channels not marked upon the charts of logic and physiology.

"If," he says, "plain logic be applied to the poetry of Keats, the lovely fabric is instantly destroyed, and there is no easier thing than for a house-painter to prove that the colors Turner used are no different from those he himself employs in painting doors and roofs. Yet despite these performances of Mr. Gradgrind and his kind, multitudes

of men and women feel a glow of ecstasy in reading Keats, and are moved to wonder and adoration by Turner's use of color."

The Roman Catholic Church is perfectly right when it presents to the people the mystery of the Mass, with no attempt whatever to explain it. It says: "Here is something that lies beyond reason; take it or leave it; accept it as something inexplicable, dimly seen through sacred symbols, but don't ask any explanations." And the power of this appeal is witnessed by the fact to multitudes of Christians the Mass, which they do not understand or presume to understand, is the living core of their religion. They submit themselves to the charm of mystery, which draws them out of the world of fact into a world of faith.

During Advent I often attended Mass at St. Patrick's in New York and always with a sense of astonishment. Here were hundreds of persons of all ranks of society bowed in impressive silence. There was no music; no exhortation; nothing in fact but a lighted altar at the end of the long nave, before which the celebrating priest bowed, murmuring ancient Latin words, which the distance alone made unintelligible. Yet it was evident that the worshippers were profoundly moved. What moved them? A sense of profound awe in the presence of what to them was a divine mystery.

That Great Mystery is, as Dr. Dawson apprehends, the living core of a Church which grows stronger every day. The religion of negation, of protest and denial, is not only faced by steady loss of members, it now has to fight for its very life with the Frankenstein monsters which it created in the day it discarded authority and invited the individual to private interpretation of the Bible as the sole rule of faith and conduct.—N. C. W. C.

PRIMA DONNA'S CURE
AT LOURDES

Miss Mary McCormick, the well-known Prima Donna, some time ago, suffered very serious injury from a bite given to her by her pet monkey.

She describes, in an article in the November number of Columbia, the injury caused by the monkey-bite. "The infection spread up the right arm," she says, "and across the shoulder, jumped down into the left wrist, and likewise paralyzed one knee. For weeks I had been helpless. I saw specialists everywhere, in Rome, Milano, Paris, and even went to England. Under their ministrations the original infection in the right arm and shoulder disappeared, the knee recovered, but the left wrist remained stiff and helpless."

The physicians gave Miss McCormick no hope of a cure. "Medicinal waters," they told her, "continued mud and other treatments might help; but a complete cure was impossible."

Miss McCormick followed the advice of her physicians, and went to Dax to avail herself of the hot springs; but she did not seem to get any satisfactory results.

While at Dax she learned of Lourdes and its miraculous cures. Her friends urged her to go there. "I wavered," says the Prima Donna, "over the decision of whether I should desert the practical massage and ministrations of the good doctors of Dax for the hope of the miraculous cure at Lourdes."

Her mind was made up as a result of a confidential consultation with her doctor. She asked him what he could tell her of the cures of the Grotto of Lourdes. The doctor shook his head and replied to her question in these words: "There is something there; we don't know what it is. It baffles science. We know what the water of the spring does, but how it does it, or why, we do not know. Cures do take place, that much I can say. To me the remarkable thing is not so much the cures that are accomplished, as the fact that though thousands of sufferers from every form of contagious and virulent disease are dipped each year into the water of the nine piscinas, yet there has never been an epidemic of disease. It almost defies belief."

This decided the Prima Donna. She resolved to try Lourdes for her paralyzed wrist. She tried it and was cured. Here is the way Miss McCormick closes her story in Columbia:

"I went there because my good doctor at Dax said there were forces science could not explain; I went doubting, a non-Catholic and, I admit, quite a skeptic. 'I came away with my wrist supple again, able to use the hand so necessary to me in dramatic parts. 'For that I thank Our Lady of Lourdes.'—Catholic Telegraph.

SYSTEMATIC GROWTH
OF CHARACTER

The grain of wheat has a close application if we look upon it as a symbol representing the processes of life in our souls under the action of religion. The life of grace is an organic growth subject to the slow and gradual developments of certain spiritual laws. As there is no such thing as a sudden fall so there are no sudden conversions. That

which we regard as sudden is in reality the first visible result of the secret workings of the religion in the soul.

The grain of wheat had passed through a long series of natural operations before it manifested itself even a little. Equally so is it in the history of the soul. How obdurate and painful are those conflicts and failures in our combat with moral evil. We struggle on sometimes gaining a partial triumph and more times seemingly being conquered. Yet beneath all this there is progress if the purpose and intention to reform remain firm and fixed. We are disheartened at the slowness and secrecy of the action of virtue. We would have the grain of wheat burst from the earth and blossom in a day, forgetting those periods of corruption through which it must pass before it shows its first glint of green. So, too, must we be tried in the fire of defeat and humiliation before we can experience even the least spiritual satisfaction. The one thing needful is not to lose courage and least of all never to submit to despair.

Moreover, it is worth noting that the grain of wheat was placed in the earth by a power external to itself—"which a man took and sowed in his field." If the grain of wheat received the first impetus to growth, not from itself but from another, so does man receive his spiritual life from Him Who entered in and elevated nature to the life of grace. Of ourselves we can do nothing. According to nature we are hungry and naked. We need some strong, beneficent Hand to feed and clothe our sickly and wounded souls. The Arm of the Lord is not shortened. The external application of God's help makes possible those moral victories which man of himself could never attain. The capacity for growth in the grain of wheat and the care exercised by the Sower bring about the desired result. The perfect

co-operation of the life of nature and of grace bring about the ideal type of the Christian.

It is likewise quite necessary that we render our souls susceptible to the influences of grace, just as the slime of the earth bent all its power for the productive generation of the grain of wheat. The discipline of mortification and prayer make the soul more pliable and alive to the transforming operations of grace.

Three things of value, therefore, are to be remembered in the struggle to strengthen character: first, that progress in virtue is slow but nevertheless sure and sometimes hidden from ourselves; second, that unaided nature is unable to make progress in virtue; and third, that progress in virtue needs the condition of co-operation on the part of the one desiring to reform.—The Missionary.



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