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DISCOURSES TO MIXED CONGREGATIONS.

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DISCOURSE VIII.

NATURE AND GRACE.

In the Parable of the Good Shepherd our Lord sets before us a dispensation or state of things, which is very strange in the eyes of the world. He speaks of mankind as consisting of two bodies, distinct from each other, divided by as real a line of demarcation as the fence which encloses the sheepfold. "I am the door," he says, "by Me if any man shall have entered in, he shall be saved: and he shall go in and go out, and shall find pastures. My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me, and I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, and none shall snatch them from My hand." And in His last prayer for His disciples to His eternal Father, He says, "I have manifested Thy Name to the men whom Thou hast given Me out of the world. Thine they were, and Thou hast given them to Me, and they have kept Thy word. I ask for them, I ask not for the world, but for those whom Thou hast given Me, for they are Thine. Holy Father, keep them in Thy Name whom Thou hast given Me, that they may be one, as We also." Nor are these passages solitary or singular; "Fear not, little flock," He says in another Gospel, "for it hath seemed good to the Father to give you the kingdom;" and again, "I thank Thee, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that Thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto little ones;" and again, "How straight is the gate, and narrow the way which leadeth unto life, and how few are those who find it?" St. Paul repeats and insists on this doctrine of his Lord, "Ye were once darkness, but now are light in the Lord;" "He hath snatched us from the power of darkness, and hath transferred us into the kingdom of the Son of His love." And St. John, "Greater is He that is in you than he that is in the world. They are of the world, we are of God." Thus there are two parties on this earth, and two only, if we view men in their religious aspect; those, the few, who hear Christ's words and follow Him, who are in the light, and walk in the narrow way, and have the promise of heaven; and those, on the other hand, who are the many, for whom Christ prays not, though He has died for them, who are wise and prudent in their own eyes, who are possessed by the evil one, and are subject to his rule.

And such is the view taken of mankind, as by their Maker and Redeemer, so also by the small company in whom He lives and is glorified; but far differently does the larger body, the world itself, look upon mankind at large, upon its own vast multitudes, and upon those whom God has taken for His own special inheritance. It considers that all men are pretty much on a level, or that, differ though they may, they differ by such fine shades from each other, that it is impossible, because it would be untrue and unjust, to divide them into two bodies, or to divide them at all. Each man is like himself and no one else; each man has his own opinions, his own rule of faith and conduct, his own worship; if a number join together in a religious form, this is an accident, for the sake of convenience; each is complete in himself; religion is simply a personal concern; there is no such thing really as a common or joint religion, that is, one in which a number of men, strictly speaking, partake; it is all matter of private judgment. Hence, as men sometimes proceed even to avow, there is no such thing as a true religion or a false; that is true to each, which each sincerely believes to be true; and what is true to one, is not true to his neighbor. There are no special doctrines necessary to be believed in order to salvation; it is not very difficult to be saved; and most men may take it for granted that they will be saved. All men are in God's favor, except so far as, and while, they fall into sin; but when the sin is over, they get back into His favor again; naturally and as a thing of course, no one knows how; owing to God's infinite indulgence, unless indeed they persevere and die in a course of sin, and perhaps even then. There is no such place as hell, or at least punishment is not eternal. Predestination, election, grace, perseverance, faith, sanctity, unbelief, and reprobation are strange, and as they think, very false ideas. This is the cast of opinion of men in general, in proportion as they exercise their minds on the subject of religion; and think for themselves; and if in any respect they depart from the easy and secure temper of mind which it expresses, it is to the disadvantage of those who presume to take the contrary view, that is, who take the view set forth by Christ and His Apostles. Hence they are commonly

severe on the very persons whom God acknowledges as His, and is training heavenward, I mean Catholics, who are the witnesses and preachers of these awful doctrines of grace, which condemn the world and which the world holds in such abhorrence.

In truth the world does not know of the existence of grace; nor is it wonderful, for it is ever contented with itself, and has never turned to account the supernatural aids bestowed upon it. Its highest idea of man lies in the order of nature; its pattern man is the natural man; it thinks it wrong to be any thing else than a natural man. It sees that nature has a number of tendencies, inclinations, and passions; and because they are in nature, it thinks that each of them may be indulged for its own sake, so far as it does no harm to others, or to a person's bodily, mental, and temporal well-being. It considers that want of moderation, or excess, is the very definition of sin, if it goes so far as to recognize that word. It thinks that he is the perfect man who eats, and drinks, and sleeps, and walks, and diverts himself, and studies, and writes, and attends to religion, in moderation. The devotional feeling, and the intellect, and the flesh, have each its claim, and each must have play, if the Creator is to be duly honored. It does not understand, it will not admit, that impulses and propensities, which are found in our nature, as God created it, may yet, if allowed, become sins, on the ground that he has subjected them to higher principles, whether in our nature, or super-added to our nature. Hence it is very slow to believe evil thoughts to be really displeasing to God, and to incur punishment. Works, tangible actions, which are seen, and which have influence, it will allow to be wrong; but it is blind to the malice of thoughts, of imaginations, of wishes, and of words. It will not believe even that deeds are sinful, or that they are more than reprehensible, if they are private and personal. Because the wild emotions of wrath, hatred, desire, greediness, cruelty, are no sin in the brute creation, which has neither the means nor the command to repress them, therefore they are no sins in a being who has a diviner sense and a controlling power. Concupiscence may be indulged, because it is natural. Behold here the true origin and fountain-head of the warfare between the Church and the world; here they join issue, and diverge from each other. The Church is built upon the doctrine that impurity is hateful to God, and that concupiscence is its root; with the Prince of the Apostles, her visible Head, she denounces "the corruption of concupiscence which is in the world," or that corruption in the world which comes of concupiscence; whereas the corrupt world defends, nay, I may even say, sanctifies that very concupiscence which is its corruption. Its bolder and more consistent teachers, as you know, my brethren, make the laws of this physical creation so supreme, as to disbelieve the existence of miracles, as being an interruption of them; well, and in like manner, it deifies and worships human nature and its impulses, and denies the power and the grant of grace. This is the source of the hatred which the world bears to the Church; it finds a whole catalogue of sins brought into light and denounced, which it would fain believe to be no sins at all; it finds itself, to its indignation and its impatience, surrounded with sin, morning, noon, and night; it finds that a stern law lies against it, where it believed that it was its own master and need not think of God; it finds guilt accumulating upon it hourly, which nothing can prevent, nothing remove, but a higher power, the grace of God. It finds itself in danger of being humbled to the earth as a sinner, instead of being allowed to indulge its self-dependence and self-complacency. Hence it takes its stand on nature, and denies or rejects divine grace. Like the proud spirit in the beginning, it wishes to find its supreme good in its own nature, and nothing above it; it undertakes to be sufficient for its own happiness; it has no desire for the supernatural, and therefore does not believe in it. And as nature cannot rise above nature, it will not believe that the narrow way is possible; it hates those who enter upon it, as if pretenders and hypocrites, or laughs at their aspirations as romance and fanaticism;—lest it should believe in the existence of grace.

Now you may think, my brethren, from the way in which I have been contrasting nature and grace, that they cannot possibly be mistaken for each other; but now I shall show you, in the next place, how grace may be mistaken for nature, and nature mistaken for grace. They may easily be mistaken for each other, because, as it is plain from what I have said, the difference is in a great measure an inward, and therefore a secret one. Grace is lodged in the heart; it purifies the thoughts and motives, it raises the soul to God; it sanctifies the body, it corrects and exalts human nature in regard to those sins of which men are ashamed, and which they do not display. But in outward show, in single actions, in word, in profession, in teaching, in the social and political virtues, in striking and heroic exploits, on the public transitory scene

of things, nature may counterfeit grace, nay even to the deception of him in whom the counterfeit occurs. Recollect that it is by nature, not by grace, that man has the gifts of reason and of conscience; and reason and conscience will lead him to discover, and in a measure pursue, objects which are, properly speaking, supernatural and divine. The natural reason is able, from the things which are seen, from the voice of tradition, from the existence of the soul, and from the necessity of the case, to infer the existence of God. The natural heart can burst forth by fits and starts into emotions of love towards Him; the natural imagination can depict the beauty and glory of His attributes; the natural conscience may ascertain and put in order the truths of the great moral law, nay even to the condemnation of that concupiscence, which it is too weak to subdue, and is persuaded to tolerate. The natural will can do many things really good and praiseworthy; nay, in particular cases, or at particular seasons, when temptation is away, it may seem to have a strength which it has not, and to be imitating the austerity and purity of a Saint. One man has no temptation to hoard; another has no temptation to gluttony and drunkenness; another has no temptation to ill humor; another has no temptation to be ambitious and overbearing. Hence human nature may often show to great advantage; it may be meek, amiable, kind, benevolent, generous, honest, upright, and temperate; and, as seen in its happier specimens, it may become quite a trial to faith, seeing that in its best estate it has really no relationship to the family of Christ, and no claim whatever to a heavenly reward; through nature man can talk of Christ and heaven too, read Scripture, and "do many things gladly," in consequence of reading, and exercise a certain sort of belief, however different from that faith which is imparted to us by grace.

Certainly, it is a most mournful, often quite a piercing thought, to contemplate the conduct and the character of those who have never received the elementary grace of God in the Sacrament of Baptism. They are sometimes so benevolent, so active and untrusting in their benevolence; they may be so wise and so considerate, they may have so much in them to engage the affections of those who see them! Well, let us leave them to God; His grace is over all the earth; if it comes to good effect and bears fruit in the hearts of the unbaptized, He will reward it; but, where grace is not, there doubtless what looks so fair has its reward in this world, for such good as is in it, but has no better claim on a heavenly reward than skill in any art or science, than eloquence or wit. And moreover, it often happens, that, where there is much specious and amiable, there is also much that is sinful, and frightfully so. Men show their best face in the world; but the greater part of their time, the many hours of the day and the night, they are shut up in their own thoughts. They are their own witnesses, none see them besides, save God and His Angels; therefore in such cases we can only judge of what we see, and can only admire what is good, without having any means of determining the real moral condition of those who display it. Just as children are caught by the mere good-nature and familiarity with which they are treated by some grown man, and have no means or thought of forming a judgment about him in other respects; as the uneducated, who have seen very little of the world, have no faculties for distinguishing between one class of men and another, and consider all persons on a level who are respectably dressed, whatever be their accent, their carriage, or their countenance; so all of us, not children only or the uncultivated, are but novices, or less than novices, in the business of deciding what is the real state in God's sight of this or that man who is external to the Church, but in character or conduct resembles the Christian. Not entering then upon this point, which is beyond us, so much we even can see and are sure of, that human nature is, in a degree beyond all words, inconsistent, and that we must not take for granted that it can do any thing at all more than it does, or that those, in whom it shows most plausibly, are a whit better than they look. We see the best, and, (as far as moral excellence goes,) the whole of them; we cannot argue from what we see in favor of what we do not see; we cannot take what we see as a specimen of what they are. Sad then as the spectacle of such a man is to a Catholic, he is no difficulty to him. He may be benevolent, and kind-hearted, and generous, upright and honorable, candid, dispassionate, and forbearing, yet he may have nothing of a special Christian cast about him, meekness, purity, or devotion. He may like his own way intensely, have a great opinion of his own powers, scoff at faith and religious fear, and seldom or never have said a prayer in his life. Nay, even outward gravity of deportment is no warrant that there is not within an habitual indulgence of evil thoughts, and secret offences odious to Almighty God. We admire then whatever is excellent in the ancient heathen, or in moderns, who are nearly in

their condition, we acknowledge it to be virtuous and praiseworthy, but we understand as little of the character or destiny of the intelligent being in whom it is found, as we understand the material substances which present themselves to us under the outward garb of shape and color. They are to us as unknown causes which have influenced or disturbed the world, and which manifest themselves in certain great effects, political or otherwise; they are to us as pictures, which appeal to the eye, but not to the touch. Thus much we know, that if they have attained to heaven, it has been by the grace of God and their co-operation with it; if they have lived and died without that grace, they will never see life; and, if they have lived and died in mortal sin, they are in the state of bad Christians now, and will for ever see death.

Yet, taking the mere outward appearance of things, and the more felicitous, though partial and occasional, efforts of human nature, how great it is, how amiable, how brilliant,—if we may pretend to view it distinct from the supernatural influences which have ever haunted it! How great are the old Greek lawgivers and statesmen, whose histories and works are known to some of us, and whose names to many more! How great are those stern Roman heroes, who conquered the world, and prepared the way for Christ! How wise, how profound, are those ancient teachers and sages! what power of imagination, what a semblance of prophecy, is manifest in their poets! The present world is in many respects not so great as that old time, but even now there is enough in it to show both the strength of human nature in this respect, and its weakness. Consider the solidity of our own political fabric at home, and the expansion of our empire abroad, and you will have matter enough spread out before you to occupy many a long day in admiration of the genius, the virtues, and resources of human nature. Take a second meditation upon it; alas! you will find nothing of faith there, but expedience as the measure of right and wrong, and temporal well-being as the end of action. Again, many are the tales and poems written now-a-days, expressing high and beautiful sentiments; I dare say some of you, my brethren, have fallen in with them, and perhaps you have thought to yourselves, that we must be a man of deep religious feeling and high religious profession, who could write so well. Is it so in fact, my brethren? is it not so; why? because after all it is but poetry, not religion; it is human nature exerting the powers of imagination and reason, which it has, till it seems to have that which it has not. There are, you know, in the animal world various creatures, which are able to imitate the voice of man; nature in like manner is a mockery of grace. The truth is, the natural man sees this or that principle to be good or true from the light of conscience; and then, since he has the power of reasoning, he knows that, if this be true, many other things are true likewise; and then, having the power of imagination, he pictures to himself those other things as true, though he does not really understand them. And then he brings what he has read and gained from others, who have had grace, to his aid, and completes his sketch; and then he throws his feelings and his heart into it, meditates on it, and kindles in himself a sort of enthusiasm, and thus he is able to write beautifully and touchingly about what to others may be a reality, but to him is nothing more than a fiction. Thus some can write about the early Martyrs, and others describe some great Saint of the middle ages, not exactly as a Catholic, but as if they had a piety and a seriousness, to which they are strangers. So too actors on a stage can excite themselves till they think they are the persons they represent; and, as you know, prejudiced persons, who wish to quarrel with another, impute something to him, which at first they scarcely believe themselves, but they wish to believe it and act as if it were true, and raise and cherish anger at the thought of it, till at last they come simply to believe it. So it is, I say, with a number of authors in verse and prose; readers are deceived by their fine writing; they not only praise this or that sentiment, or argument, or description, in what they read, which happens to be true, but they put faith in the writer; and they believe sentiments or statements which are false, on the credit of these. Thus it is that people are led away into false religions and false philosophies; a preacher or speaker who is in a state of nature, or has fallen from grace, is able to say many things to touch the heart of a sinner or strike his conscience, whether from his natural powers, or from what he has read in books; and the latter forthwith takes him for his prophet and guide, on the warrant of these accidental truths which it required no supernatural gifts to enforce.

Scripture provides us an instance of such a prophet; nay, of one far more favored and honored than any false teacher is now, who nevertheless was the enemy of God; I mean the prophet Balaam. He went forth to curse the chosen people against an express command from heaven, and that for money; and at