FIVE-MINUTE SERMON

SEPTUAGESIMA SUNDAY

LIFE'S PURPOSE

Brethren, know you not that they that run in the race, all run indeed, but one receiveth the prize? So run, that you may obtain. (1. Cor. ix. 24.)

There is a great question, my dear brethren, that comes home some time or other to every man in the world who is not entirely taken up with the passing pleasures and fleeting interests of the moment; to every man, that is, who lives as a man, and not as a mere child. It is the most important and vital of all questions, and it will return often on us, put it away as much as we will. It is this: "What am I here for? what is the use, what is the purpose of all this life which I am living? What is the goal to which it is tending? what end do I hope to obtain?"

Yes, we must look forward in this way sometimes, and we must try to find something in the future better worth having than what we have now, or our life, with its labors and fatigues, becomes a burden almost too great to be borne.

So one man proposes wealth, another knowledge and learning, another fame and honor as his object in life; or at least he looks forward to bringing up his children to whom he can leave his memory and his name, and who will carry on and complete the work he has begun.

But we Christians do not seek for an answer to this question. The answer is written plainly by faith in our souls; we may try to forget it or put something else in its place, but we shall find no other in which we can believe. The answer for us is, that this life has no end or object in itself which can justify or explain it, but that is a time of trial, of probation for something better: that we live in order that it may be seen from our life whether we are worthy to share in an eternal life: that only beyond the grave can what the soul longs for be attained, and that we may fail in attaining it if we do not keep it steadily in view and work for it with all the strength we have.

So our life is a race, a struggle for an immense and unspeakable prize to come at its end; and a prize which will never be offered again if we do not secure it this time. If we fail in this life our failure can never be retrieved; nor will anything else ever be offered us to live for. For all eternity we shall see what we might have had, and shall be tortured with vain remorse; and nothing else will give us even a moment's peace. This eternity will be intolerable, even were there no other pains in it; but on account of this alone we shall seek death for ever, and never find it.

And from this race, this struggle in which we are now entered, there is no escape. We cannot withdraw and have our name struck from the list of contestants. There is no half-way place which we can take between triumph and defeat. "Know you not," say St. Paul, "that all run in the race?" Yes, a power greater than ours has put us on the track, and is drawing us along it, whether we will or no. We cannot remain as we are, for He whose power has placed us here made us for Himself, and we cannot rest till we rest in Him.

Since, then, we have to run in the race; since we have to suffer, to labor, to pursue a happiness which we now have not; since we must do this even in spite of ourselves; since we cannot sit down and give up our place, what folly it is to run to no purpose, to turn aside and try to forget the only possible reward for all our toil, the only thing that can make the life which we must live worth living! Let St. Paul's words on this Sunday sink into our minds; and since we have to run in this race on which everything depends, let us not trifle and lose its precious moments, but so run that we may obtain.

THE MORAL TRAINING OF CHILDREN

By the Bishop of Newport.

In the October Pastoral (writes the Bishop of Newport in his Advent Letter) it was proposed to continue on a future occasion the subject of the Moral Training of Children. Accordingly we now proceed to treat of that Self-repression, or Self-denial, which is so essential in life, and which is rarely acquired unless men and women have been accustomed to it from their childhood.

SELF-DENIAL

Self-repression is necessary by the passions of human nature, which every one of us inherits at his birth. Our natural tendencies to pride, sensuality, sloth, temper, and other kinds of self-gratification are called passions. In themselves the passions are not sin, or sinful. They only become sinful when the human will deliberately indulges them, yields to them, or puts occasions in their way. Luther and Calvin taught that human nature and its passions were, formally and essentially, sinful. This doctrine, which widely infects Protestantism at the present day, leads naturally to the idea that a man cannot help his sins; that it is no use to strive against one's nature, seeing that you cannot get rid of it, and that if you only trust in Christ it does not matter much how you indulge yourself, provided you do not come into collision with human law or with your neighbors. The Catholic teaching is that the passions are one thing and the will another; and that whatever a man may feel, there is never any sin except so far as the will consents; whatever temptations may trouble his senses or his intelligence, moral guilt only begins when the rational human will freely yields to them, either in act or in desire.

Hence every Christian has a two-fold duty with regard to the sinful propensities of nature, namely, resistance and mastery. He must resist—and when his passions rise up against a grave precept of Almighty God he must resist under pain of mortal sin. But he must go further; he must strive to obtain such a mastery over his passions that not only may the danger of mortal sin be far removed, but that even in lesser conflicts and in the ordinary occasions of life he may be able to rule them, and may keep himself entirely faithful to the grace of His Heavenly Father.

It must be further remarked that the passions, being seated in the bodily nature of man, may be made stronger and more violent by indulgence, and, on the other hand, may be weakened and even exterminated by systematic repression. We not unfrequently meet with men and women who have so indulged themselves in pride, covetousness, sensuality and spiritual sloth, that they seem to be unable, when temptation offers, to help giving way. They will sometimes tell you that this is so. They must not, however, be believed, for they can always pray, at the very least, and so obtain the grace they require. On the other hand, the saints, and men and women who lead a spiritual life, are found to have so diminished by self-discipline, and God's grace, the violence of their natural propensities that they seem to be almost exempt from the weaknesses of human nature. But such persons are very rare. We have no despotic power over our passions. They are independent of the rational will. They are the natural result of original sin, are excited by the presence of their objects, and follow laws of their own. All that we can do is to manage them, by turning their own nature and their own laws against themselves, as when one weakens the force of a metallic spring by keeping it under constant pressure.

Children, as there is no need to say, develop passions long before the age of fourteen. Until they attain the age of responsibility and the use of reason, there can be no sin in their acts of self-indulgence or in their display of passion—although those who have the care of them cannot begin too early to teach them self-command and self-restraint. As for boys and girls over seven it is quite possible for them, by deliberate pride, disobedience, sensuality, contempt, anger and sloth, to become guilty of grave sin. The task of those who are responsible for the training of children, therefore, is to watch their evil propensities, and to give them all the help they can in resisting them and in mastering them. To fail in this duty is to expose the child to spiritual destruction.

FOOLISH INDULGENCE

First of all, then, there are numbers of children ruined by foolish indulgence on the part of their parents and others. This is a marked characteristic of the present day, and is perhaps a reaction from the undue severity of two or three generations ago. It shows itself in unnecessary and excessive pampering, caressing, excusing and admiring. Certainly a child ought, as far as possible, to be kept contented and happy. An atmosphere of severity, repression and hardship prevents a child's nature from expanding as it should do, and leaves it stunted and distorted. But it should never be lost sight of that children are naturally vain, exacting, prone to envy, forward and lazy. Great discretion is, therefore, needed in praising or noticing them, in giving them what they clamour for, in regulating both the kind and the amount of their food, and in giving them their liberty. It is much easier for a parent to give them all they want and to let them do as they like. That is the way in which children are spoilt at the present day. And this hurtful indulgence of children does not always come from the wish to save trouble. It sometimes springs from a genuine affection for one's children, and a pride in them. Such love and gratification are entirely praiseworthy. But they should not be foolishly displayed. The dearest and the most charming children are the most easily spoilt; and many a parent is visited in after years by the results of foolish indulgence, and has to lament the day when he allowed the bad seeds of vice and dissipation to take root unchecked in the soul of his beloved child.

CORRECTION

Not only are parents bound to abstain from spoiling their children, but they are bound also to correct them. That is to say, when a child outwardly shows vanity, disobedience, greediness or temper, the father or mother should administer a reproof, and if necessary, should punish. By this, a child is both instructed in its moral duty—a matter which is more necessary than many people think — and impelled to take pains to repress bad propensities. But it is just on the point of correction that so many parents do harm rather than good. Correction, to be of any use, should be both reasonable and opportune. But many parents correct in anger and temper; they say the wrong thing, and by their passion and excitement neutralise entirely their moral influences. Others, again, never cease from harassing the child with querulous complaints and petty scolding, until at length the child ceases to care or notice. Correction should be considered, measured, and adapted to time and circumstance. Once made, the parent should see that it is attended to. Punishment, if needful, should inevitably follow. There cannot be a doubt that, with children, the conviction, arising from experience, of the certainty of punishment is a powerful stimulus to the invaluable habit of self-restraint. But punishment more than any form of correction, needs to be wise, considerate and strictly moderate. For there is always the danger that punishment will stir up the child's rebellious passions, and harden it in wrong-doing, instead of moving it to good resolutions. This danger is always greatest when he who punishes is seen to be angry and unjust. There is much parental punishment that is merely parental temper. Such punishment works infinite harm, and is the cause of the moral ruin of multitudes of children.

For the rest, the "repressive" training of children is chiefly concerned with the virtues of Humility, Obedience, Patience and Frugality.

THE VIRTUES

We have already seen what is the meaning of Humility, and how necessary it is for a follower of Jesus Christ to repress that troublesome and unquenchable "self" which puts itself even in the place of God. It is not necessary to lecture children on the nature of Humility. They best learn what it is at the feet of their Heavenly Father. But there is no more effective way of putting Humility into practice, and of weakening the dangerous impulses of "self" than the exercise of Obedience. By Obedience the child learns the habit of repressing self-will, and of conforming its natural wilfulness to law and authority. One of the most distinguishing features of our modern civilization is the prevalence of independence and self-assertion. The gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ requires men to obey both divine law and human law; both God's commandments and the authority of those who have on earth the right to command. The gospel teaches that such obedience should be a real obedience of the heart, grounded on Christian humility and on the genuine wish to obey. It is not too much to say that, at the present day, Obedience is practically a dead virtue. Such outward submission as there is—such as cannot be helped if civilised and social life is to go on—is accorded without any love of that humility and obedience which Jesus Christ has taught, but rather with distaste and mental resistance, grudgingly and sparingly. Young men and young women are accustomed to question everything and to criticise everything. This propensity is anti-Christian, and is perilous to eternal salvation. It can only be counteracted by Christian training in the practice of obedience and by Christian instruction in its spirit. What is required of parents is the reasonable and consistent exercise of authority. Children should be made to do what is right, just and becoming. Caprice, selfishness and despotism on the part of parents are as bad for the child as for the parents themselves. Children obey readily enough if they are treated kindly and reasonably, and they soon acquire the valuable habit of obedience. If, at the same time, the father or mother tries, at opportune moments, to explain to them the beauty and the preciousness of that humble spirit which sacrifices the evil self before the throne of God, and emulates afar off the sentiments of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, a Christian character is formed which in future years will throw all its weight on the side of the Kingdom of God.

Children are not naturally rebellious, but submissive, and a sensible father or mother should have little difficulty in forming them to the habit of Obedience. But there are other impulses in which the germs of pride exist and which must be carefully watched. As has been already said, they are vain and conceited, and these evil propensities should be repressed. "Showing off" is innocent enough; but it contains the germ of deliberate pride. A wise parent will, therefore, keep the child out of occasions and temptations, and will inculcate the necessity and the value of good and spiritual intention in all that is done or said. When the child has to endure failure, reproof or ridicule—a thing which most children feel keenly—it should be kindly encouraged to turn to the holy will of God, to accept the humiliation, and to offer it up in union with the humiliations which Jesus accepted for our sake. And in a word, all pride or vanity, in talents, be longings or achievements, in looks or in dress, should be counteracted by turning the child's heart to the God Who gives all these things, to Whom alone belongs glory and praise. Vanity in a child may be a small matter—and it would be a mistake to treat it as if it were serious. But as the powers develop and strengthen, it becomes more deliberate in act and more rooted as a habit. It must not, therefore, be permitted to have its own way.

The exercise of Patience represses the evil passion of anger, teaches the habit of Christian resignation, and accustoms the child to govern its own desires. Anger, in children, is really very often a frenzy, a short madness. It is generally more a physical transport than a sin. But if uncorrected and unchecked it becomes dangerous, and is likely to spoil the character and wreck the soul. From earliest infancy it should be taken in hand. Fortunately, most children, when passion has evaporated, are more or less ashamed of the exhibition they have made of themselves. The parent should wait for this period of calm. It is no use engaging in a contest with a child when it is excited. Lead it away, put it in banishment, leave it in solitude, but do not inflame its passion by scolding. Sometimes the calm word, or the mere look, of a mother that it really respects we quickly soothe it. And then, at the right moment, the child must be taught to think of the Child Jesus in His meekness and patience, be turned to contrition, and be prepared to be on its guard when the occasion shall happen again. Another form of impatience is want of resignation in suffering of pain. With great kindness and sympathy the suffering child should be led to accept the holy will of God, Who wishes to use all pain to draw us nearer to Himself, and should be reminded of the Passion and Cross of Jesus Christ. Who has suffered so much in order to sanctify our sufferings, and to make them precious for the gaining of Heaven. Children must also be taught to be patient when they want anything. Such impulses are often mere greediness, and will probably disappear as years go on. But it is a good moral lesson for them to be moderate in desire, to express themselves calmly and with consideration for others, and to put up with disappointment in a Christian spirit. All these lessons, inculcated with prudence and in the right season, go to form the true Christian of the years to come.

FRUGALITY

Further, it is of great importance that children should be trained to Frugality. Nothing spoils the character more irretrievably than the unchecked habit of self-indulgence. We have only to look at the world we live in to see that men and women in these days worship ease and luxury, caress their bodies and their minds, and show irritation at everything that pricks or inconveniences them. This anti-Christian disposition is not confined to the rich or the well-to-do. The masses of our fellow-countrymen who obtain their livelihood by the work of their hands are quite as much bent upon self-gratification. Their idea of pleasure may be coarser and their enjoyments less refined, but they are none the less determined to enjoy themselves, and thereby quite as much degraded and spoiled in all spiritual respects. The Christian ideal is, a sober, restrained and hard life; a life that is lived principally for the immortal soul and next for the mind and heart; a life in which the body is taught to use food, drink and recreation not for their own sake, but only as means to the carrying out of those higher purposes for which our Heavenly Father has placed us in the world. One great reason why this Christian idea of life is so little practised is that so few are taught it in their childhood. The pampering of children is carried to an excess which is really pitable. Nature, in their case, prescribes the plainest of food, total abstinence from alcoholic drink, regular hours, and the absence of excitement. What too often happens is that parents, partly through mistaken affection, partly through ignorance, and partly through supineness and heedlessness, feed their children very much as they feed themselves, allow them to contract the fatal taste for drink, keep them out of bed, and take them to all kinds of unwholesome entertainments, or, perhaps, let them run wild in the streets. If a child is to grow up into a true follower of Jesus Christ, it must be habituated to moderation, regularity, temperance, and an abhorrence of a soft life. It must be taught to live by reason and not by impulse; to act on religious principle and not to be the slave of appetite; to despise luxury; to mortify itself in eating and drinking; and, in a word, to take the side of the Cross of Christ without hesitation or regret. No man who does not in a genuine sense take up the Cross can be called a follower of our Lord and Saviour. Why are not children explicitly told of this law and gently encouraged to live by it? Unless they are told they do not realise it. They hear, as they grow up, the words of Christ read out, and they repeat forms of prayer. But they easily come to look upon all such language as mere formality; the more so, as the practice of their elders seems so utterly unaffected by either Gospel or prayer-book. What is wanted is that those responsible for children should translate the Gospel into language which they can understand; that they convince them that our Blessed Lord meant to lay down a practical command. But parents who do not live up to this command themselves can hardly, for mere shame, press it upon their children. And that is in reality one of the reasons why the Cross is so little preached to the child; and it is also a reason why so many parents have to dread the fate of those who give "scandal to little ones" (S. Matthew xviii. 6). The fault is not on the part of the child. The child, with all its natural propensities to evil, is seldom wanting in a certain ingenuous sincerity and generosity. Let the ideal be put before it, and there will never be much difficulty in its being taken up. But when boys and girls grow up to adolescence without having caught a glimpse of the great law of the Cross, how can it be expected that we shall have a Christian generation?

All parents and persons in charge of children are bound, in virtue of their office, to train them, by instruction and management, in repressing such passions and impulses as have here been spoken of, and in acquiring the rudiments of a pious and moral life. In carrying out their duty, they should avail themselves of such help as they can get from priests, teachers, sacraments and school. It is true that a parent can never leave the training of a young child entirely to others. The child lives with the parent, and especially with the mother, and if the intercourse of life is altogether barren of good advice and opportune correction, nothing else can supply that deficiency. The well-to-do parent may hire governesses and servants, but however able or devoted these may be, they are never near enough to a child's soul and heart to influence it with adequate depth and completeness. The poor mother may plead that she is ignorant and overworked—but this duty does not require either learning or leisure, but only Christian feeling and the saying and doing of the right thing at opportune moments in the course of the day. But all parents should make use of certain external assistance. In the first place, they should know that the passions of human nature can never be resisted or mastered without the aid of divine grace, which is given, as a rule, chiefly through the sacraments. It is no small part of the parental office to see that children are prepared in good time and with adequate instruction for confession and Holy Communion, and to keep them up to a frequent participation of these sacraments. It is too much the custom to leave all this to the priest and the school. But however zealous the priest may be, and however efficient the instruction given in school, it is really the parent's responsibility, and there should be no mistake about this. As long as the sacraments are treated as a department of school work, we shall have the children giving them up as soon as they leave the school. It cannot be denied that it is better that children should be marched in companies to confession and Communion by their good and solicitous teachers than that they should never approach at all. But it would be far more to be wished that the sacraments should be a part of the family life. All parents who are worthy to have children should be anxious, by example and pious words, to impress upon them how necessary is God's holy grace to keep them good, and how ready and anxious is our Lord Jesus Christ to give them His grace in order to overcome themselves.

PROTECTION AGAINST EVIL

In concluding these words, let it be repeated that a parent in order to make moral training effectual must guard his child from any training or any influence that is evil. It must be kept from bad companions and bad books. This, it would seem, could best be done by keeping children, when not at school, as much as possible under the mother's own eye. Parents plead that their children have no where to play except the streets. There is much truth in this, But, all the same, the life of the streets makes moral training almost impossible, and that for two reasons; first, because children learn so much evil there, and, secondly, because these young frequenters of the streets become as it were, strangers to their own families, and acquire a wild and irresponsible temperament which fits them for any and every kind of mischief. We frankly confess that we do not know how this evil can be remedied. All that can be done is to palliate it by those means which our zealous clergy do their best to adopt, such as Associations Sodalities, Clubs, the Boys' Brigade, and similar institutions. When priests and good pious laymen draw our boys around them and interest them in salutary and useful occupations, the poor child is saved in great measure from the corruption of bad company. And when, in judicious moderation, such good work is enhanced by the presence of piety and religious feeling—above all, when the kindly priest can gather his boys around him in the name of the altar and the choir—it is touching to see how the unspoiled nature of a child responds to spiritual light and warmth, and how the primitive propensities of nature are kept down and disappear. But for the moment we are addressing parents. There is no way of compelling them by law to train their children to be good as there is to oblige them to feed and clothe them. But Almighty God holds them responsible for the soul as well as for the body—and we trust that, by God's grace, these words may reach their hearts and make them reflect how momentous their responsibility is.—London Tablet.

INDIANA PROSELYTERS

METHODISTS METHODS TO DECOY CATHOLIC ITALIANS INTO FOLD

A clever game to decoy Catholic Italians into the Methodist fold is being conducted in Indianapolis. The work is in charge of a Rev. Louis Lops, who states that he originally came from Rome, where he was engaged in work with the notorious Rev. B. M. Tipple, pastor of the American Methodist Church.

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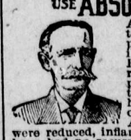

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