

# FIVE MINUTE SERMON

BY REV. F. P. HICKY, O.S.B.

## DEVOTEDNESS TO CHRIST

ST. GERTRUDE—NOVEMBER 15, 1292  
"The Son of God, Who loved me," (Gal. ii. 20.)

It is marvellous how a secluded life of a nun, who died over six hundred years ago, stands now for a full refutation of what is often said against convent life, and reveals it in its purity and excellence. It is no medieval legend that we have to trust, no mere tradition that love and piety may be adorned with mistaken zeal. The calumnies about the idle and ignorant lives of monks and nuns even now, let alone in the Middle Ages, before printing multiplied books and gave all a chance to be educated, are clearly refuted by the life and writings of St. Gertrude, a Benedictine nun. With perhaps the exception of St. Teresa, there is no female writer of the Church who ranks above this holy nun. Though a German, her books were all written in Latin, and they have always been treasured by the Church, and can readily be purchased at the present day.

Gertrude was a typical nun of the thousands and thousands who passed their days under the Rule of St. Benedict. Of noble family, at five years of age she was committed to the care of the Abbess of Nisibene to be educated. Clever, diligent, and devout, she made equal advancement in learning and piety. When old enough she was professed, taking the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, and that other special Benedictine vow of stability—that is, of persevering in the Order. How she observed the strictness of the rule, and the fact that the only occasion on which she left the convent—and she died at the age of seventy—was when, at the request of a council of Bishops, she took charge of a neighboring house to bring it up to the perfection which reigned in her own.

Sequestered from the world, hidden and unknown, these zealous nuns we find were in all things and devotional exercises identical. We may say, with sisters of the present time, if we could transmute St. Gertrude and her sisters into some existing convent, keeping the same rule and serving the same good Lord and Master, scarcely a difference could be noticed. Exactly the same Divine Office would be chanted; the same Holy Mass, and the train of sisters approaching for Holy Communion; the same home devoted to reading, meditation, and holy silence. And as we learn from St. Gertrude herself, they practised so many of the self-same devotions that are the joy and sweetness of convent life today. Never a day did she pass without praying for and doing some penance for the souls in Purgatory. And as she did herself, so would she teach the others. Constant ejaculations and turning in spirit to her Guardian Angel was another pious practice. A tender devotion to the blessed Virgin Mary was especially cultivated by our Saint. One of her prayers (Exercit. vi.) runs thus: "May the most holy heart and soul of Thy glorious Virgin-Mother Mary give Thee thanks and praise for me, whom Thou didst choose for Mother for the need of my salvation."

Devotion to the Sacred Passion and Death of our Redeemer was also a most prominent feature in her life; and we find mention of the stigmata, though she hardly prayed that they might be only in her heart. She endeavored to conceal the heavenly favors which she so frequently received, but in vain; for instance, ecstasies during Mass, at Holy Communion, visions in which our Divine Lord spoke to her "as a friend to a friend," and the miracles that happened in answer to her prayers. Her loving Master wished such things to be manifest to be an encouragement and a glory to her sisters. When the poor penitents around clamoured for her help, when, after a long winter, the ground was frost-bound late in the spring, and they dreaded a famine, a short prayer from St. Gertrude, and the thaw came, and the sun smiled once more, and all the country-side thanked God for His mercy. The same poor people, remembering this, appealed to her again when prolonged wet weather was ruining their harvest, and their hope was again fulfilled by her prayers, to the confusion of the humble Gertrude, but to the glory of God.

Another great devotion, thought to be so modern, and the propagation of which we truly ascribe to the blessed Margaret Mary, we may be surprised to find was well known and practised by the community of St. Gertrude—devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus! In instructions which she wrote, we find prayers such as these: "O Jesus, my sweet hope, may Thy Divine Heart, broken with love for me, and which is ever open to all sinners, be the refuge of my departing soul, when, through Thy infinite love, in a moment all my sinfulness may be absorbed, that I may enter with Thee into the heavenly choir. O beloved of my heart" (Exerc. c. vi.) And again: "Thy Divine love has opened to me the most sweet Heart of my Jesus. O Heart brimming over with sweetness, O Heart overflowing with love, O Heart full of mercy, make me die for love and devotedness to Thee. O most dear Heart, I pray Thee absorb all my heart's affection in Thee. Be ever mindful of me; may the sweetness of Thy love refresh my poor heart, I pray. May the tenderness of Thy mercy cover me, for alas!

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many are my evil desires—my good ones none. And grant me, dear Jesus, to love Thee in all things and above all things, to cling fervently to Thee, to hope and trust in Thee." (Ibid., c. vii.)

The violet is an inconspicuous flower, but its charm is its fragrance. Then what is the great charm of St. Gertrude, spouse of Christ, in the hidden life of the cloister from childhood to old age, that made her so dear to the Sacred Heart? It was her humility. It is a marvel of the grace of God that one so pure, so ardent in God's service, should think herself unworthy to walk God's earth. And this she really thought. Oftentimes an invalid, through her hard life and fastings and little sleep, when she could not be present at the Divine Office or the Holy Mass, she humbly confessed that it was for her wickedness that she was thus deprived. But above all consolations she placed conformity to the Holy Will of God. Once when our Blessed Lord offered her the choice to be well and attend the Church solemnities or to remain an invalid, she refused to make a choice, but humbly replied: "O Lord, I wish to do Thy Holy Will."

If we wish to be pleasing unto God, let us learn to wish only His good Will, and to be humble, and this prayer of blessed Gertrude would teach us how: "O sweet mercy of God, full of tenderness and clemency, behold in the sorrow and pressing need of my heart, seek safety in Thy loving Will, for thou art my whole hope and trust. Thou hast never deceived one, and sorrowful. Thou hast never rejected the vilest sinner. Thou hast never abandoned one seeking help. Thou hast never passed by one in grievous trouble without look of mercy. The needy and poor Thou dost always assist, as a mother her child. To all invoking Thy most holy Name Thy loving assistance is given. And even unworthy me, Thou wilt not cast from Thee on account of my sins and my unworthy life" (Ibid., c. vii.)

Such is the spirit of St. Gertrude, and such her placid, uneventful life; but a life full of good works and virtues in the sight of God. Learn from her, such as we find in this convent in the thirteenth century, and the life, the devotions, the spirit that existed there, are all to be found as real and as thorough in convents of the present day. Such souls are not only the defence, but the glory of conventual life.

## THE GENEVA CONFERENCE

Floyd Keeler in America

Both the friends and the foes of the Protestant Reformation often fail to realize the importance of the Geneva played in that movement. Too generally one's attention is drawn to the more spectacular figure of Luther, despite the plain fact that his revolt, left alone, would have come to little. It was in its beginning simply the rebellion of a lustful German peasant monk, hot-headed and wilful, and it would have been advocated only by a limited circle of similar minded persons and a few adulterous princes like Philip of Hesse, had not greater minds than Luther's taken it up. And it is to Geneva that we must look for the mind which gave to Protestantism a philosophy and so a permanent basis of existence. John Calvin, a man of ability, trained in the law and in theology, turned his attention to crystallizing the opposition to the Catholic Church, and he did it well. Geneva was the seat of his power, civil and religious, and the record of conditions there when St. Francis de Sales was its Bishop shows how thoroughly he had eradicated all traces of the Church and her ways. Since to Geneva we must look for making permanent the breach in the Church's ranks, it is altogether fitting that to Geneva we should look for the first attempt to remedy that condition.

Reports have just reached this country concerning a great gathering which took place in August in that Swiss city, when we are told, "eighty churches and forty nations were represented." Nearly every body of people who acknowledge "Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour" was represented there, "except that the Church of Rome was conspicuous by its absence." And this form of

expression shows more clearly than anything else why. When the deputation of Anglican Bishops visited the Pope to deliver in person an invitation to him to send an official representative to the conference, which this one was the outgrowth, there were many, including some Catholics, who had high hopes that it would be an opportunity for bringing all bodies of separated Christians in touch with the Holy See. When his Holiness made his decision and refused the offer tendered in all good faith and a sincere desire for its acceptance, there was a feeling of great disappointment, again shared by many Catholics. But subsequent events have justified the position which the Holy Father then took. The conference to which he was invited was to be "On Faith and Order." It was to proceed on the assumption that these offered debatable ground, that each of these "eighty churches" or any other of the several hundred, had as much right to its opinion as any of the others, and "the Church of Rome" would simply have been the eighty-first one. Hence the Pope, as Vicar of Christ, as the custodian of the treasures of the Kingdom of Heaven, could not consent to participate. He could, and indeed, would gladly receive at any time those who sought reunion. He has many times issued invitations to the "other sheep" seriously to lay to heart the injury to the cause of Christ which their divisions bring about, and countless thousands have heeded these invitations, and returned. The Pope was not indifferent to the fact that here were a large group who at least thought they wanted unity, but he could not accept their terms and remain faithful to his trust. I say they "thought" they wanted unity, for when a concrete proposition of any sort is brought before many of these denominations they reject it forthwith. For example, the Methodist Christian Advocate in commenting on the Lambeth appeal for unity recently said: "We are by no means sure that it is the revealed will of Christ that His followers should be organically one. Our experience with such a 'Catholic Church' has been anything but reassuring." Thus, at the outset they dash the proffered cup from their lips, rejecting it as a poisonous thing. There is small prospect of any union there, yet these same Methodists and these same Anglicans were two of the "eighty churches" which were officially represented at Geneva, where at the very outset of the conference Bishop Gore (late of Oxford) opened the discussions in these unmistakable terms:

"In the New Testament I do not seem to find anything which is entitled to call itself membership of Christ which is not also membership of this one visible Society, and the Society would be represented by local societies. But each local society was the embodiment of this one Catholic society and owed submission to it, the conception of its catholicity being very far ahead of its actuality. There was not to be a variety of societies. The Divine discipline was to be the obligation of belonging to the one society. That seems to me to be unmistakable in the New Testament. The Divine discipline brought to bear on the tendencies and varieties of human temperament consists in obligation of membership in the one visible society and submission to its authority."

But even at Geneva did they all accept this? Hardly! The American Presbyterians emphatically announced that they could not consider as binding upon them anything that the conference might adopt, and the representatives of the Greek Church, while announcing that "the Orthodox Churches, are willing to join any league of Churches for the purpose of establishing Christian principles and working together against every system which is opposed to those principles," yet commit themselves to nothing whatever. They are always found glad to co-operate in visits of courtesy, particularly with High Church Anglicans, who glory in such things, but they never overstep the bounds and make any acknowledgement of Anglican claims. How far then has the Geneva Conference proceeded? Does it justify the sanguine hopes of those who have spent so much time in projecting it? Let us examine its history in order to see if we can arrive at a fair answer to these questions.

This conference is the net result of ten years of monumental labor, prayer and thought. It was first projected in the General Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church in 1910 and has occupied the time of many of its best workers since that date. The secretary of the Commission then appointed, Mr. Robert H. Gardiner, has done wonderful service. To his indefatigable zeal and untiring devotion is due what ever success has come, and one who has not followed carefully the course of this work can scarcely appreciate what a task it has been to get into touch with all these various Christian societies, to disarm their prejudices, to arrange meetings of groups of them, to get any sort of agreement from them, and to make possible the holding of a conference like this one. Truly there has been nothing like it since the Reformation; its ardent protagonists say not since the days of the Eastern schism. Yet in what way the cause of Christian unity has been furthered is hard to see. Some unusual events did take place. A conference of men of so many languages, races, modes of

thought, diversities of theological position, yet all filled with a desire to mend the rents their forefathers had made in the seamless robe of Christ was significant. Its meeting in Geneva would seem to be a sort of humiliating reminder of the way in which these troubles had been caused. They met, they listened, they passed resolutions, they differed, but they were all united in only one thing, that thing which a recent writer in America has said distinguishes and unites all Protestantism, viz.: that the Pope is not the Vicar of Christ and that his terms cannot be acceptable. From the pomp and ceremony of the most elaborate Byzantine rite to the bald service of the most "hard shelled" Baptist is a far cry in externals, but they are all united by this one internal principle, and so long as they are there is nothing further that can be said or done to further Christian reunion. The Church is not to be made by force. The Church has a Divine government, it needs no set of resolutions to put it into operation, and until Christian men recognize that, there is nothing further that can be done to bring them back so there shall be "one fold and one shepherd." All that anyone can say of the results of the Geneva Conference is summed up in the concluding paragraph of

the account given in the Living Church: "The final service, on August 10th, the (Eastern) Festival of the Transfiguration, was that held in the Russian church on the invitation of the Holy Eucharist was offered in the presence of all the delegates with all the pomp and ceremony of the eastern rites. At the closing business session of the same day Bishop Brent made one of his monumental addresses, and the remarkable event was closed."

Catholics must continue to be keenly interested in every effort of this kind, even though they recognize that it must result in nothing tangible. They must continue to pray that Our Lord's high-priestly prayer for unity be fulfilled, and thinking of Geneva, can they do better than to invoke that saintly Bishop of Geneva, who is reckoned as the patron of convert makers, and utter their heartfelt petition, "St. Francis de Sales, Pray for us?"

Sickness is contagious, so is vice; but goodness and grace are also contagious. In a thousand ways salvation is more easy when our days are spent with the good and holy who live by faith.—Father Galway, S. J.

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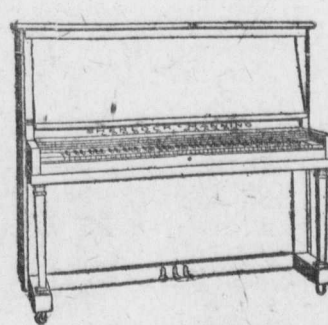
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