

PRAYERS FOR THE DEAD

THE SUBJECT TREATED BY CARDINAL GIBBONS

The Counselor in Catholic Transcript

The General Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church, which has just been closed, discussed a number of topics, more or less important, but none, I think, more interesting to the average Protestant than the subject of prayers for the dead.

Some of the most intellectual of the clergymen of this denomination have long since seen the coldness and apparent lack of Christian charity in the prayers as prescribed in the Book of Common Prayer, where after the beautiful Scriptural passages have been read, the minister begins to appeal for the living, that they may be taken care of, but never utters a word in behalf of the departed spirit of the person about to be buried.

And recognizing this apparent want of charity in neglecting to pray for the dead, these clergymen have used one or more of the ancient prayers for the soul of the departed which appeared in the First Book of Common Prayer. Although these were removed in the later ritual of 1552 these clergymen have maintained that the prayers were duly authorized, and that they had a right to use them since they had been approved in the first book.

And I think it is safe to say that in no case were these prayers for the dead have been used at burial services, even in the case of Congregationalists, as have often happened, has there been any objection made on the part of friends of the deceased.

It seems so natural that we should pray for the soul of the departed one at his funeral, rather than for the future comfort of the surviving family, that such prayers have always been listened to and indeed joined in, by the attendants at the funeral, with unusual gratitude and satisfaction.

I indeed I have been told by an Episcopalian clergyman, who has since been elevated to a prelate, that he has always used a prayer for the soul of the departed, and has always found that the friends of the deceased have heard it gratefully.

It was thought soon after the opening of the world war, that the Church of England would return to the custom of remembering their departed friends in their prayers; and for some time it had become a common custom. But a change seems apparent at present, and the drift that way appears to have less force.

Among the clergymen, indeed, particularly those who are well read in patristic literature, the desire to have at least some form of prayer for the dead inserted in the church ritual is notable; but the laity, who have the greater weight in theological discussions, at least so far as the voting goes, are not yet ready for the change.

Of course a belief in the efficacy or utility of prayers for the dead implies the curative dogma, the existence of Purgatory, and vice versa.

But the Protestant, whether a Calvinist, an Anglican, or a Lutheran, is not yet ready to admit the existence of Purgatory, although every one admits the reasonableness of the doctrine. It is not so much that they cannot see the truth, but that they will not see, and none are so blind as those who will not see, as the proverb truly says.

"It is not strange," says Cardinal Gibbons, in speaking on the subject of Purgatory and prayers for the dead, "that this cherished doctrine should be called in question by the leveling innovators of the sixteenth century, when we consider that it is clearly taught in the Old Testament; that it is, at least, inculcated in the New Testament; that it is unanimously proclaimed by the Fathers of the Church; that it is embodied in all the ancient liturgies of the Oriental and the Western Church, and that it is a doctrine consonant with our reason and eminently consoling to the human heart."

Then the venerable Cardinal quotes the famous passage in the Second Book of Machabees, Chapter xii, verses 43 to 46, which every Catholic reader will find in his Bible; but unhappily his Protestant friend will not find it so easily, as the Books of the Machabees are seldom printed in the Protestant version of the Scriptures.

And after quoting these important words, Cardinal Gibbons goes on: "These words are so forcible that no comment of mine could render them clearer. This passage proved a great stumbling-block to the Reformers. Finding that they could not by any evasion weaken the force of the text, they impudently threw overboard the Books of the Machabees, like a man who assassinates a hostile witness, and pretended that the two Books of the Machabees were apocryphal. And yet they have precisely the same authority as the Gospel of St. Matthew or any other portion of the Bible, for the canonically of the Holy Scriptures rests solely on the authority of the Catholic Church, which proclaimed them inspired."

This was not the only case where the Reformers impudently threw parts of the Bible overboard when found not in accord with their new teaching. Everybody knows of Luther's coarse remark about the Epistle of St. James, as being an epistle of straw and no part of the inspired Scriptures, because it taught that faith alone will not suffice for salvation.

But that kind of reasoning may go among the ignorant and vicious; it does not pass with the intelligent. "But even admitting for the sake of argument," says the Cardinal, "that the Books of Machabees were

not entitled to be ranked among canonical Books of Holy Scripture, no one, at least, has ever denied that they are truthful, historical monuments, and as such that they serve to demonstrate that it was a prevailing practice among the Hebrew people, as it is with us, to offer up prayers and sacrifices for the dead."

Indeed it has never been denied, even by the first Reformers, that the Jews practiced praying and offering sacrifices for the dead. "Our adversaries confess," says the Very Rev. George Haydock, in a note commenting on the passage cited by the Cardinal, "our adversaries confess that such was the opinion of the Jews and of ancient doctors of the Church. But they declare it superstitious."

In order to show the folly of this claim, Father Haydock cites many passages, showing that Christ and the apostles recognized the practice, among them being the passage in the first chapter of the Second Epistle of St. Paul to Timothy, where the great Apostle of the Gentiles prays for his dead friend Onesiphorus, in words similar to those used by an Irish Catholic, Lord have mercy on him—"The Lord grant to him to find mercy of the Lord in that day."

But I am not, and do not wish to be thought to be discussing a theological subject, I take the dogma for granted. If anybody wishes to see the subject discussed very interestingly he will do well to read Cardinal Gibbons' "Faith of Our Fathers," or the Rev. Dr. Hanna's excellent article on Purgatory in the Catholic Encyclopedia.

What a terrible loss literature would have sustained if there had been no belief in Purgatory! I think it is conceded by modern culture that Dante is the greatest poet of all time. Even Shakespeare and Homer must bow to him in some material respects.

And some of the most wonderfully poetic portions of the Divine Comedy are to be found in the Purgatorio.

The very idea of offering prayers for the dead has something in it so tenderly sweet and soothing that it is poetic in itself.

MY CHAPLET

I come to cull sweet blossoms Of pure and rare perfume; To wreath a simple chaplet To deck my loved one's tomb. Oh, how shall I wreath the chaplet, And what shall the flowers be? Ours, our noble, Mater Domini.

The violets are vanished, The buttercups are flown; The stream flows down the valley In a mournful moan; The scent of the wayside roses Is now but a memory; Ah, misers nobis, Jeau D'amine!

Tennyson gives beautiful expression to the Catholic doctrine regarding prayers for the dead in his fine poem, "Morte D'Arthur," in the King's last words:

"I have lived my life and that which I have done May He within Himself make pure! But thou, If thou shouldst never see my face again, Pray for my soul. More things are wrought by prayer Than this world dreams of—Wherefore, let thy voice Rise like a fountain for me night and day."

Cardinal Newman, as he alone could do it, has brilliantly combined dogma, supplication and refined poetic sentiment in a hymn on the same subject as follows:

Lord, help the Souls which Thou hast made, The Souls to Thee so dear, In prison for the debt unpaid Of sins committed here.

Those Holy Souls, they suffer on, Resigned in heart and will, Until Thy high behest is done And justice has its fill.

For daily falls, for pardoned crime, Thy joy to undergo The shadow of Thy Cross sublime, The remnant of Thy woe.

O by their patience of delay, Their hope amid their pain, Their sacred zeal to burn away Disfigurement and stain;

O by their fire of love, not less In keenness than the flame, O by their very helplessness, O by Thy own great Name;

Good Jesus, help, sweet Jesus, aid The souls to Thee most dear, In prison for the debt unpaid Of sins committed here.

COMING EARLY TO MASS

In many instances there is absolutely no excuse for coming late to church. People are not hurried or pressed by other affairs on Sunday. If they reach the church five or ten minutes after the services have begun, it is wholly because of an unreasonable habit of spending too much time in the House of God. Else, why the studious care which people take of leaving the house only with sufficient margin of time to reach the church? Why do they delay so much preparation lest they be too early? They are not gingerly about coming some minutes before the play begins at places of amusement. They waste ten times the time than "lost" otherwise during the day. But is the time that a Christian spends in church just before the service really "lost?" The expected

answer is: By no means. A sterling Catholic has expressed the opinion that five minutes' reflection and self-communion before the priest comes to the altar is productive of the best spiritual results. A practice of reaching the church five minutes before the services have begun and of spending the time in strictly religious reflection—powerfully assisted by the associations of the place—has always prepared an excellent disposition for assisting at the sacred ceremony that ensues. This Catholic on a point that is a difficult thing to come off the crowded street, sometimes hurried, and often occupied with worldly thoughts, and then to kneel down with proper disposition before the Sacrifice of the Mass. The five minutes of preparation before "church begins" has, he thinks, doubled the spiritual advantage to him of the hour that ensues.—Brooklyn Tablet.

THE OCCULT HEALING OF DISEASE

The following case, throwing some light on the occult "healing" of disease, and exhibiting some of the perils involved in the process, may be of interest to the readers of America. Some years ago, not very long after the publication of my little book on "The Dangers of Spiritualism," I received a letter from a young man who was a teacher in one of the Anglican colleges in London. He expressed a wish to meet me personally in the hope that I might be able to aid him in finding his way out of a very difficult situation in which he had become entangled. I made an appointment with him at my house and met a man of superior education and intelligence. He was a teacher by profession, keenly interested in his work and a devout Anglican of the High Church school of thought. But, for a year or so past, he had serious cause for alarm by reason of an affection of the eyes that was attended by a steadily increasing loss of sight. A few weeks before writing to me he had consulted a famous specialist in London, who had examined his eyes and who had felt it to be his duty to tell him plainly that the affection from which he was suffering was incurable and that he would become quite blind after a while. It was a form of shrinking or degeneration of the optic nerve, for which the best science has no remedy. Experience was fully bearing out the accuracy of the specialist's diagnosis, for Mr. B.'s sight gradually became so defective that it rendered it impossible to carry on his teaching and was compelled to resign his post. Being a young man still, and having no other means of subsistence, his grief and anxiety respecting the future were naturally very great. Amongst his acquaintances was a man who was a "spiritualist" and to whom he had told the grievous misfortune that had fallen upon him. This man had advised him to consult a "spirit-doctor" and had assured him that by these beings, possessed of knowledge not within the reach of "physicians in the flesh," marvelous cures were often effected. Mr. B. had no views as to the rightness or wrongness of these experiments and was easily induced to attend a Spiritualistic seance. There a spirit-doctor was summoned who made an examination of his eyes, especially of the optic nerve, and pronounced a diagnosis that corresponded entirely with that made by the eye-specialist, only fuller and more detailed. This tended to establish Mr. B.'s confidence in the knowledge and integrity of the spirit intelligence. It was also asserted that, in the natural order, there was no remedy for the ailment. The spirit-doctor, however, declared that he would be able, by the use of "vital magnetism," to restore the nerves of the eye to activity. This was to be accomplished by the instrumentality of the medium while in the trance state, through whose hands the spirit would operate, the patient simply presenting himself at the seance three or four times a week and passively submitting himself to the operator.

To Mr. B.'s intense joy and delight the sight of his eyes was gradually coming back. He could go about again in London and was contented, and there seemed to be a reasonable prospect that sight would be entirely restored after a time. Mr. B. became conscious however that an extraordinary and inexplicable change was passing over his spiritual life. He found it difficult to pray. Strangely disturbing thoughts, wholly out of keeping with his natural temperament and disposition, began to torment him, especially when preparing for Holy Communion or kneeling at the altar. Doubts respecting the truth of the Christian religion such as he had never known before, began to invade his mind. As a consequence the fervor relaxed, he became indifferent and careless and after a time, gave up his religious practices altogether. The conversations with the medium still further undermined his faith, but, being of a deeply religious temperament and consequently uneasy and alarmed at this inexplicable inward change, he searched to see what he could find in Holy Scripture, in the history of Christianity and in general literature respecting these Spiritualistic practices. To his surprise he found nothing but condemnation, a circumstance which greatly increased his alarm and which led him to seek further information and counsel. Mr. B. being an Anglican of the advanced type, had been in the habit

of going to confession to an Anglican clergyman, a Mr. Black, who at that time was a popular and well-known confessor in the High Church section of the Anglican community in London. He has since then married and settled down to lay life in Paris.

Mr. Black was giving a mission in a fashionable West-End church and one evening, at the conclusion of the service, Mr. B. sought him out, requesting an interview. He found Mr. Black in the sacristy of the church, an open book in his hand. When B. had told him his story Mr. Black closed the book he was reading and handed it to him. "There," he said, "read that. It is my answer to your question and it will solve your difficulty." The book was my "Dangers of Spiritualism." The reading of that book brought B. to me. He told me his pathetic story in full detail and we discussed the matter from every point of view. My position was an exceedingly painful one; but what could I do or say in view of what I know about these "cures" and their inevitable consequences? His choice lay between the recovery of his eyesight with the loss of his faith, and the preservation of his faith with his religious life at the loss of his eyesight.

I was able however to give B. some comforting assurances. I pointed out to him that experience had shown that these "occult cures" are scarcely ever permanent. A temporary improvement only, often due to the fact that the sufferer is generally effected, until the sufferer is entirely drawn into the Spiritualistic net and the soul's life is undermined. A steady relapse then takes place for which the spirits have a plausible explanation, and the last state of the patient is in the end worse than the first. Often too the spirits themselves cause slight ailments, effect a "cure" by removing them and thus get the faint credit for the "cure" they have seemingly effected. Often too the symptoms of the disease only are removed, the patient being led to imagine that the disease itself has disappeared, thus cutting him off from every possibility of timely medical aid, a rapid decline and death ultimately terminating the process. Of this nature are the pseudo-Christian Science cures of which we hear so much in our days.

With these facts before him Mr. B. had really no difficulty in making his decision. It was inevitably a deeply painful one which called forth my reverent sympathy, but which was, on the other hand, a wonderful testimony to the strength and stability of his religious convictions. For Mr. B. determined there and then to give up the medium and "the curative process" and to trust his future to the hands of God. He left me that day a sadder, but wiser man. I saw him again some weeks later when he came to my house quite blind, led by a friend. He told me that the change for the worse had taken place almost immediately. He had had the greatest difficulty in finding his way home on leaving my house. In one street he had nearly stepped into an open cellar door; at a street crossing and at a moment when some inward impulse had impelled him to cross, he had come very near being run over. But he had recovered his faith and had resumed the practices of his religion in his own intense joy and satisfaction and he was certainly very far from being an unhappy man.—J. Godfrey Raupert, K. S. G., in America.

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