

FIVE MINUTE SERMON

DEVOTION TO THE DEAD

"He that is a friend loveth at all times, and a brother is proved in distress." (Prov. xvii. 17.) There are several misconceptions widely prevalent concerning devotion to the souls in Purgatory. It is often regarded as a recent devotion sprung up in these latter days, as May being the month of Mary. Again, it is regarded as the devotion for nuns and women and children, as if men had something more important to remember and trouble about. And, lastly, there are those who speak flippantly about Purgatory, and who declare that they will only be too satisfied if they ever get there! Let us find answers to all this from the Saints of the early ages and the days of the Faith—Saints who compel attention and respect from the name they bear as doctors and illustrious writers of the Church.

In all the most ancient forms of Mass express mention is made of prayer and sacrifice for the dead. Tertullian declares that the custom came down from Apostolic times. St. Cyril of Jerusalem in his "Instructions" says: "We pray for all among us who are departed this life, believing that this will be the greatest relief to them, for whom it is made, whilst the holy and tremendous Victim lies present." St. John Chrysostom also says: "To pray for the faithful departed in the tremendous mysteries was decreed by the Apostles." St. Ambrose preaching at the funeral of the Emperor Theodosius—whom once he had rebuked and penanced and who had repented—says: "I loved him, and therefore I follow him into the country of the living. Neither will I forsake him till by tears and prayers I shall bring the man whither his merits call him, unto the holy mountain of the Lord." Again the same Saint preaching on Valentinian the Younger: "Give the Holy Mysteries to the dead. Let us, with pious earnestness, beg repose for his soul. Lift up your hands with me, that at least by this duty we may make some returns for his benefits. No day shall pass upon me over in silence, no prayer of mine shall ever be closed without remembering you. You shall have a share in all my sacrifices."

St. Augustine writes: "Nor is it to be denied that the souls of the departed are relieved by the piety of their living friends, when the Sacrifice of the Mediator is offered for them, or alms are given in the Church." But St. Augustine did more than write or preach about it; we know how lovingly he fulfilled the duty. St. Monica, his mother, when dying had said to him: "Lay this body anywhere; be not concerned about that. The only thing I ask is that you make remembrance of me at the altar of the Lord wherever you are." At her burial, the sacrifice of our ransom was offered for her. "I pray for the sins of my mother," he writes; "hear me by the remedy of our wounds, who hung on the Cross and sitting on the right hand, intercedes for us. Forgive her, forgive her, I beseech Thee, who hast promised mercy to the merciful" ("Confessions," lib. 9, c. 13).

More powerful, indeed, than their words are the examples of the Saints; and coming down from these remote ages to the glorious monastic time of Cluny and Citeaux, let us seek proofs there for devotion to the souls in Purgatory. St. Odilo, Abbot of Cluny, in the year 998, was moved by God's grace to institute in his monastery the commemoration of "All Souls." It seemed so natural to him that celebrating one day "All Saints," that the next day prayer should be made for "All Souls" waiting and longing to join the Saints in heaven; and whose hour of bliss could be so accelerated by the prayers, Communion, and Masses of the devout. "All Souls' Day" soon was known and adopted from abbey to abbey, from cathedrals to parish churches, till shortly the voice of Rome spoke, and it became the universal practice of the Church. From Odilo's love and pity for the suffering souls, what a harvest, for nine hundred years, of graces and blessings has been gathered by the Church for its poor children in Purgatory!

St. Bernard likewise gives us an example of devotion to the dead, and how pleasing it was to God. After his mother's death, he resolved daily to recite seven Psalms for the repose of her soul. He was only young then, but he persevered for a time. One night, however, wearied and somewhat remiss, he omitted the prayers for his mother. Next day the Abbot St. Stephen called him and asked: "Whom did you commission yesterday to say the prayers for your mother?" God had revealed the neglect of his pious practice to his superior! for absolutely no one knew either of his practice or its neglect. How pleasing to God, then, are prayers for the departed, that a miracle should be worked to warn Bernard lest he should grow careless! This rebuke was never forgotten, and throughout his life St. Bernard was a devoted and zealous friend of the souls of the faithful departed.

A little boy gives us another lesson on this same subject. Peter Damian was left an orphan at an early age, and one of his brothers gave him a home, if a home it could be called, for his biographer tells us that Peter was treated not like a

slave, but as a beast! As soon as he was able, he was sent to tend the swine. His life was one of abject poverty and neglect. One day he found a piece of money—a silver coin. Picture what that was to such a boy! A fortune! It would seem; perhaps he had never had a penny of his own before. What pleasure would that coin represent to a half-starved, bare-footed boy. And what did he do with it? Peter took the money to the parish priest, and asked him to say Mass for his father's soul! That simple fact proves two things: First, that in those days the poor were instructed about Purgatory, for Peter must have heard of it on Sundays in the church; and, secondly, that the poor then, as now, love to have Masses said for their dear departed ones. We cannot say that his fame and sanctity had this act of charity and self-denial for its foundation; but it is consoling to remember that the first thing we learn of the great Benedictine monk, St. Peter Damian, Cardinal and Archbishop, was that, even as a boy in dire poverty, he gave his all for a Mass for the dead.

Let us reverence, then, this devotion for prayers for the dead, as one of the earliest and even apostolic practices of the Church: to reverence it as favored by the lives of the greatest Saints; and as a practice that will obtain mercy for us, because we ourselves have been merciful to others.

A last word to those who speak lightly of Purgatory. This is no new thing; and we find such men rebuked many hundred years ago. St. Casarius of Arles, who died in 542, speaks of such. "A person may say I am not much concerned how long I remain in Purgatory, provided I may come to eternal life. Let no one reason thus. The fire of Purgatory will be more dreadful than whatever torments can be seen, imagined, or endured in this world. And how does anyone know whether he will stay days, months, or years? He who is afraid now to put his finger into the fire, does he not fear lest he be then all buried in torments for a long time?" And venerable Bede asserts: "The fire of Purgatory will be more intolerable than all the torments that can be felt in this life." And St. Augustine writes: "Those souls suffer by wonderful but real ways more than our imagination can represent."

Alas! those who think little of Purgatory now will realize its punishments when it is too late. As they despised it in life, and as they neglected to show mercy to others, when they were on earth, it will come home to them when they are helpless there "that a hard heart shall fare evil at the last" (Eccles. iii. 27.)

RELIGIOUS REVIVAL IN FRANCE

(From a Universe Correspondent in France)

In an article in the Revue des Deux Mondes the Vicomte Georges d'Avenel gives the results of a very interesting investigation which he has undertaken among the French dioceses to ascertain the true proportion of practising Catholics in France. He comes to the conclusion that the number of real Catholics has greatly increased, and that this increase had already begun before the War. That the younger generation of Frenchmen, who are largely inspired by the reaction against the mismanagement of public administration under the Republic, as directed by numerous anti-clerical Governments, is largely Catholic in its outlook is well known; but the figures which M. d'Avenel has collected apply to the general mass of the population. He draws attention to the undoubted revival of Catholic organisation and propaganda in which people of all classes are now proud to take a conspicuous part, whereas a decade ago there was a widespread sense of self-consciousness and disinclination to appear to be associated with any sort of religious activity.

Most remarkable is the fact that this religious revival has been particularly noticeable in the towns, and that the various organisations, such as the Catholic Young Men's Associations and the Catholic trade unions, are now prospering in districts which were formerly notorious for their anti-clericalism. In the Cathedral of Sens, for instance, there are now 75,600 communicants every year, as compared with 35,000 ten years ago, and in the town of Auxerre the number has increased by 40,000 within the same period. Do these figures mean that the minority who have retained the practice of religion have become more devout, or that the revival is really spreading among the mass of the people? The figures for Paris, where six million Hosts are consecrated every year, cannot indeed be interpreted as showing anything more than that there is a devout minority of one-tenth of the population who go to Holy Communion frequently, since the great majority neglect the Sacraments altogether. At St. Sulpice, for instance, which is a devout quarter of the city, there are 10,000 people who go to their Easter duties out of a total of 39,000 in the parish, but at Sainte Marguerite there are only 6,500 out of a total of 96,000.

But there is no doubt whatever that in all the towns of France there is a rapidly extending religious revival. M. d'Avenel declares that his own researches show that

"in Burgundy, as well as in Normandy; in the Orleanais, as well as in Champagne; in Limousin, or in Roussillon, or in Lorraine, the ecclesiastical authorities all report in the same terms that from since some time before the War the number of men who practice their religion has steadily increased." The old reluctance to take part in any Catholic organisation has generally disappeared; it is no longer thought "bad form" to be connected with Catholic activities; and the young generation especially is eagerly taking part in every sort of Catholic organisation. New associations and organisations are constantly being founded and extend from town to town, and they never lack for funds. Paris alone subscribes a million and a-half francs every year to the parochial collections and the special collections amount to scarcely less. But more important than this generous subscription of money is the universal expression of the new and determined will of the people themselves in their various organisations—whether it be the Catholic railwaymen or the employees of the large stores, or the shop girls or the Catholic Young Men's Associations—to make public profession of their Faith and their convictions.

There is no doubt, says M. d'Avenel, that the number of practising Catholics in France is enormously larger today than it was, not only in the year 1890, when Taine published his estimate of their strength, but at any time during the second half of the nineteenth century. In 1847 a well-known priest, the Abbe Petot estimated that not more than two millions out of a total population of 32,000,000 French people went to confession. That may have been a pessimistic estimate, but in the days of the Second Empire the Abbe Bougault—who himself became a Bishop afterwards—wrote that he knew a certain Bishop who made inquiries on being appointed to a diocese as to how many of his people made their Easter Duties, and found that there were barely 37,000 out of 400,000. And Mgr. Dapanoup, in a pastoral letter written in 1851, that there were scarcely 45,000 out of 350,000 souls in his diocese who made theirs. That was in the diocese of Orleans, where today the number of Easter communicants is more than 100,000. And according to the statement of the present Bishop, the number of frequent communicants is nowadays fifteen times as large as it was not long ago.

A certain diocese in Normandy recently, on making an inquiry into the state of religion in its 420 parishes, discovered that out of 278,000 people it could count 121,000 as Easter communicants; but that figure is undoubtedly above the average for the whole of France. M. d'Avenel, in arranging the statistics collected in the course of his inquiry, divides the French dioceses from which he has received detailed information into three groups, of which the first comprises 27, the next 28, and the third 18. In the first category he places those dioceses which he describes as devout, in which the majority of the women go to Mass and make their Easter Duties, and in which roughly half the men go to Mass and a quarter of them make their Easter Duties. The second group comprises the dioceses which he describes as lukewarm, in which the majority of women go regularly to Mass, but only half of them make their Easter Duties; while only a third of the men go to Mass and between twelve and twenty-five per cent. go to their Easter Duties. The third group he describes as indifferent, since in them only a minority of the women go to Mass and less than twelve per cent. of the male population make their Easter Duties. He adds that while these latter dioceses must justly be called indifferent, they cannot be described as definitely anti-religious, because they nearly all retain the practice of having their children baptised, and being themselves married and buried in the churches.

These 67 departments, says the Vicomte d'Avenel, include a total of 28 million souls, and the figures relating to them may therefore be reasonably considered as typical of the general state of religion throughout France, apart from Paris and the department of the Seine, which between them include some 41 millions of people; since the 6 millions who are thus not accounted for by the returns on which the estimate is based include dioceses of each category, as, for instance, the strongly Catholic districts of Nantes and Bayonne, or the indifferent dioceses of Chartres or Limoges. He concludes as follows: "We may therefore calculate that for the whole of France, apart from Paris and the three restored departments of Alsace-Lorraine, out of the 34 million people of both sexes who live under the French Republic, some 10 millions are practising Catholics; between 16 and 17 millions keep more or less in conformity with the teaching of the Church, but only by fulfilling one part of the duties she imposes, by attending Mass on Sundays; and only 7 or 8 millions, among whom are a group who are definitely hostile, live without practising the Church's teaching in any form, and, although they have been baptised, are Christians only in name."

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