

Sunday Afternoon Readings

(By RIGHT REV. MGR. POWER for the N.Z. Tablet.)

VIII.—OUR PERSONAL SINS.

Sin made Lucifer and his rebel angels outcasts from Heaven, it drove our first parents out of the garden of Eden and subjected them to many trials and much suffering, and it has no less terrible an effect upon the souls of all who commit it. No matter who the sinner may be, sin is always an outrage upon the Divine Majesty, because it upsets the order established by Him for the good government of His creation.

In His creation God has set up a universal harmony; and in this harmony man holds an important part. He belongs to God, to himself, to mankind; and towards each of these he has special duties, to violate which would be a sin, and this precisely because it would go against the order set up by God. Man belongs to God, therefore, he is bound to worship and serve Him. He is bound to learn the manner and order of this worship and service that he may know how to fulfil these duties. The duties of religion are the most necessary part of his moral life. Priests are bound to know what these duties are and to make them known to the people; they are bound to preach and the people are bound to come and hear—"He that heareth you, heareth Me." Culpable ignorance of these duties will not save from sin. Neglect of prayer and religious instruction, omission of Sunday Mass, refusal to receive the Sacraments at the appointed times, all these are sins against the worship of God. We owe to God subjection of intellect and will. These are the two great ennobling powers of man, and it is the service of these that God first and above all requires. To rebel with either the intellect or the will is the greatest possible disorder. A sin of the mind is a greater outrage against God than any sin of the body could be: to deny revealed truth, to defy the authority established by Him, to act against justice, these are sins of powers that are entirely spiritual, and are, therefore, of the greatest moral depravity. A gross generation will not understand this, but it is true nevertheless. We should examine our consciences very carefully on this point. What use are we making of the intellect with which God has endowed us? How are we educating and strengthening the spiritual power of free will? What are the repeated acts of virtue and religion by which we are training and developing it and leading it into subjection to the will of God? On our answer to these questions will depend most of all our triumph over sin and our hope of salvation.

Man has duties towards himself, towards his body and towards his soul, for he is a being made up of soul and body. He must preserve the harmony intended by God between his soul and body. A deliberate and secret unlawful indulgence of the flesh does harm only to the sinner himself, not to the neighbor, yet it is in itself a greater sin than one against the neighbor, for a man's duties towards himself comes before his duties towards his neighbor. St. Thomas says that the harmony between soul and body comes

next after the harmony between the soul and God. To maintain this harmony is man's duty towards himself if he would share in the beauty of Heaven. Progress in the spiritual life is possible to the soul only while it is in the body. There will be no spiritual progress after death. The soul will retain after death just the degree of spirituality it had at the moment of departure from the body. So far then from the body being an obstacle to spiritual life, it is only *through* it that spiritual life is possible. Nothing contributes so much to spirituality as purity, and purity is a virtue of the body; it is the body that is chaste. Spiritual life, then, is the life of the body; and, therefore, the senses must be controlled during life in such a manner as to become worthy of the soul and beneficial to it.

How do we treat our bodies? Do we always remember that they are the temples of the Holy Ghost and that they are to reign gloriously with God hereafter. Godless education has played havoc with the body as its promoters have at length discovered. Confronted with the ruin of social life which they have caused, they are looking about for remedies, but the best they can discover in their blind search is instruction in the secrets of sexual life for little children in the home and in the school. But Catholics can have no part in the unveiling of Christian reticence; they will be content with teaching their little ones that their bodies are the temples of the Holy Ghost, and that they should honor them here as God will honor them in eternity; and that as we must hold ourselves in total subjection to God, so must the lower part of ourselves be kept in subjection to the higher.

Our adversary, the devil, frequently attacks us through the body. Drunkenness, lust, and sloth are favorite weapons of his; by these he makes many slaves. Let us be on our guard against him; let us flee from personal sin as from the face of a serpent, cast off the works of darkness, and, putting on the armor of light, walk honestly as in the day! Let us keep untainted the glory that God has given us, let us keep ourselves free. He that commits sin is the servant of sin. "His own iniquities catch the wicked, and he is fast bound with the ropes of his own sins."

Man has duties towards his neighbor, duties of love and justice. Mutual love, forgiveness of injuries, silence about faults, showing mercy, giving aid without measure and honor without dissimulation, observing humility, mildness, patience, and compassion in our dealings, pursuing peace, helping the stranger, the orphan, and the widow, delivering the weak from the hands of the proud, comforting the afflicted, doing to others what we would wish that men should do unto us, this is what the law of God lays down for our conduct. Any violation of this commandment of charity is an offence against our neighbor and a sin against God. If we have failed in this, we must do penance, and henceforth walk worthy of God.

Robbery, theft, usury, making dishonest profits, injuring the property of others, neglecting to make restitution, all such conduct is sinful, because opposed to God's law of justice. The punishment attached to such sins in the Holy Scriptures is terrible and should keep us in constant fear.

So far I have referred to our duties towards God, ourselves, our neighbor, and have shown how they oppose the good order established by God for the harmonious conduct of our lives. But there is a consideration that makes our rebellion more hateful and more shameful than that of Adam. We have before our eyes something that Adam could not see,—that sin leads to so much sorrow and misery here: He had not the Blessed Sacrament to help and strengthen him against sin. So far as we know, he sinned only once, and spent a life, some hundreds of years long, in doing penance. But we sin easily, allowing its corruption to eat into the very marrow of our souls, and we pursue our accustomed course as if nothing very serious had happened. Adam betrayed God, but it was in the hope, vain indeed, of a great gain; we betray Him for a trifle of money, a little ease, a worthless smile, a momentary gratification. Adam knew nothing of Bethlehem, Gethsemane, or Calvary, but we, knowing of these, have a peculiar slime of ingratitude attached to our rebellion.

Behold Him Who was once the Babe of Bethlehem, now a man, lying prostrate in the agony of Gethsemane and sweating blood! Behold Him on the morrow, tottering, falling, fainting along a dolorous way, a heavy cross on His shoulders; women are weeping, and men insulting; He arrives at Calvary; He hangs upon the Cross; He cries with a loud voice, and, bowing His head, He gives up the ghost. Inanimate nature is indignant at the murder of its Creator; the earth roars and quakes, the rocks split asunder, the graves throw up their dead, the sun turns into blood, ashamed at the infamy; and we continue to sin; we who have been purchased by the blood of Jesus Christ, who have been taught from childhood the details of that blood-shedding, who have been nourished on His Sacraments:

"If My enemy had reviled Me, I would verily have borne with it. And if he that hated Me had spoken great things against Me, I would perhaps have hidden Myself from him. But thou, My familiar, who didst take sweetmeats together with Me!"

Let us think of our poor souls, of the horrible leprosy with which we disfigure them, of the slime of foul ingratitude with which we cover them. "Know thou and see that it is an evil and a bitter thing for thee to have left the Lord Thy God!"

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