

Blessed Are The Poor In Spirit

By the Very Rev Thomas N. Burke.
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ON THE FIRST BEATITUDE.

(Delivered at the Advent Conferences in the Catholic University, Dublin)

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.”

WE are come together to consider the things that regard our eternal interests — to consider what we owe to God, to our neighbor, and to ourselves. We meet to reflect on the Divine law, the reasons and the extent of its obligations, and our own fulfilment of them.

Blessings being Catholics.

In all this, we have not to seek for the truth, but only to reflect upon it, and apply it to ourselves.

We have an infallible guide in truth: the Church the pillar and the ground of truth. We are not forced, thank God, to fall back upon our own judgment, like those of whom Saint Peter speaks, “blind and groping.” But to you I say, in the words of the same Apostle, “I will begin to put you in remembrance of these things, though indeed you know them and are confirmed in the present truth; but I think it meet to stir you up by putting you in remembrance.”

Not so, with others, to whom an entrance has not been ministered, into “the everlasting kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ.” They are obliged to inquire into everything, to attempt to prove everything, even first principles and the mysteries of revelation, and they are tempted to reject even the holiest truths of God, which are discussed before that most fallible tribunal — the reason of man. Of such, a great man formerly intimately connected with your university, complains, whilst yet a Protestant, in the introduction to one of his works.

“Unhappy is it,” he says, “that we should be obliged to discuss and defend what a Christian people were intended to enjoy; to appeal to their intellects instead of ‘stirring up their pure mind, by way of admonition;’ to direct them towards articles of faith which should be their place of starting, and to treat as mere conclusions, what in other ages have been assumed as first principles.” “Surely life is not long enough to prove everything which may be made the subject of proof; and though inquiry is left partly open, in order to try our earnestness, yet it is in a great measure, and in the most important points, superseded by revelation, which discloses things which reason could not reach — saves us the labour, of using it when it might avail, and sanctions thereby the principle of dispensing it;” but he adds, “We have succeeded in raising clouds which effectually hide the sun from us; we have nothing left but to grope our way by reason as we best can — our necessary, because now our only, guide... We have asserted our right of debating every truth, however sacred, however protected from scrutiny heretofore; we have accounted that belief alone to be manly which commenced in doubt, that inquiry alone philosophical which assumed no first principles, that religion alone rational which we have created for ourselves;” and the end, my brethren, “loss of labour, division, and error have been the threefold gain of our self-will, as evidently visited in this world — not to

follow it into the next.” Such was the testimony of a singularly deep and candid mind, even before it was yet enlightened by the pure rays of divine truth. [Blessed John Henry Newman.]

But for us, we seek not to find out what is the truth. That we have already found. Our great Mother holds it, and propounds it, and we say to her in the words of the Apostle, “I know whom I have believed, and I am certain that she is able to keep that which has been committed unto her,” (Scio cui credidi et certus sum quia potens est depositum meum servare.) the sacred deposit of all truth. (See 2 Timothy 1:12). But we inquire, “that we may be able to comprehend with all the saints, what is the breadth, and length and height, and depth of that divine truth.” (Ephesians 3:18) To know also, “the charity of Christ, which surpasses all knowledge,” that is, to pursue the truth into all the details of its practical teaching in the moral law, where our faith reveals itself in charity “unto all the fulness of God.” (Ephesians 3:19)

This is the great object of the Catholic preacher, after the example of our Divine Lord himself; for it is worthy of remark, that His first Sermon, on the Mount, in which we might naturally expect an exposition of Christian dogma, was a moral sermon, sketching out the great features of the Christian character, by which His followers should be individually known amongst men to the end of time.

Let us consider them:

First — “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

The first word spoken by our Lord was, “Blessed.”

“Much people followed Him,” says the Evangelist, “from Galilee, and from Decapolis, and from Jerusalem, and from beyond the Jordan, and seeing the multitude, He went up into a mountain;” this was His pulpit — befitting the preacher and His message. He was “the desired of the everlasting hills,” and it was written, “Get You up into a high mountain; You that brings good tidings to Sion (Zion); lift up Your voice, You that brings good tidings to Jerusalem; lift it up, fear not; say to the cities of Judah, behold your God,” and opening His mouth, He taught them. The mouth of God had been closed for four thousand years (so some said), and when last it spoke, it was to curse the first sinner and the earth in his work, “Cursed is the earth in your work;” (Genesis) “the earth is infected;” (Isaiah 24:5) “for the Lord has spoken this word, ...therefore, shall a curse devour the earth.” (Isaiah 24:6)

Christ, the Antithesis of Adam.

Now, it was fitting that Christ’s first word should be a revoking of this curse, for, as Saint Paul loves to bring out, He was the antithesis of Adam. “As by the disobedience of one man, many were made sinners; so also, by the obedience of one man, many shall be made just, ...therefore, as by the offence of one, unto all men to condemnation; so also, by the justice of one, unto all men to justification of life.” And yet, if we look into the blessing, we shall find that the curse pronounced upon the world is rather confirmed than revoked by it, for it says, “Blessed are the poor in spirit,” that is, Blessed are they who in some sense or other are alienated and separated from the world.

Why Christ begins with the Spirit.

Mark that Christ begins with the spirit. First, because “God is a spirit, and they that adore Him must adore Him in spirit and in truth.” Hence, the Apostle says: “God is my witness whom I serve in my spirit.” And secondly, because the spirit or seat of the affections is that portion of man’s soul which guides and influences all the action of his life. There are two great portions — divisions — powers — faculties in the soul of man: first, the apprehensive or intellectual; and second, the affective or

appetitive. To the first belongs the memory, and the office of this first great portion of the soul is to apprehend and preserve ideas, and from them to form knowledge. The second great division of the soul, which we have called the spirit (for the very word *suspirare* signifies desire), contains the intellectual appetite or will, the affections and desires; and as this will of man, which is led not only by the intellect but still more forcibly by the passions or desires, according to the saying of the poet, Virgil, “*trahit sua quemque voluptas,*” (Everyone is dragged on by their favourite pleasure,) determines his every act, for that act alone is human which proceeds from it; it follows that the portion of the soul that holds this will and these affections and desires is the source and spring of all moral life in man.

Christ our Lord, therefore, began with the spirit, because He wished to change the face of the earth. “Send forth Your Spirit, and they shall be created, and You shall renew the face of the earth.” The Spirit of God was to go forth and to take the place of the human spirit, and Christianity was to effect this, that men should no longer be led by their own spirit — that is, their own natural affections and desires — but by the Spirit of God. According to the word of the Apostle, “Whosoever are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God,” and thus they should “put on the Lord Jesus Christ; for if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of His.”

But to Christians he says, “Know you not that you are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?” Blessed, then says the Saviour, are the poor in spirit. Some commentators apply this word to those who are really poor, either by privation in the world or by the high voluntary poverty of holy religion, which we find in the cloister. That the text bears such an application is abundantly proved from Saint Luke, who adds in the context, “Woe to you who are rich, for you have your consolation.”

Still, the text bears a much more extended application, and, therefore, others interpret poverty of spirit to mean humility, the foundation, and, at the same time, the crown of all virtues. This interpretation is also true, and the most adopted by the holy fathers.

But we can find even more in this beatitude than the canonization of humility. As it was the first feature of the Christian character propounded by the Saviour, so, upon reflection, we find in this beatitude, the first foundation of Christian life — namely, Faith, for truly the man who is poor in spirit means the man of faith.

What is poverty? Poverty means privation — an emptiness — an absence of something — a casting away from us and a renunciation of something. Poverty of spirit, then, would mean a casting away of desires — affections — appetites — seeing that the spirit of man is the seat of all these.

But does Almighty God demand of us a relinquishing of all affections and desires? In other words, does He demand of us a destruction of this great portion of our being? Certainly not. God is not a destroyer, nor is destruction pleasing to Him. It is not, then, so much the destruction as the transfer of our desires, hopes, affections, which Almighty God demands of us by poverty of spirit. There are two kinds of possessions — the temporal and the eternal — the visible and the invisible — the things of the present and those of the future — the goods of sense and those of faith. Now, man is naturally inclined to seek the things of this world rather than those of the world to come. He depends so much upon his senses, even for the things that belong to the soul, such as knowledge and even faith; he is so completely surrounded by sense that he is naturally inclined to rest in sense, to seek his happiness in the present enjoyment of sense, and to put away from him all consideration of future and unseen things. Much more are we unwilling to make any sacrifice for the sake of the

unseen — to relinquish the visible for the invisible — to deprive ourselves of present enjoyment because of blessings to come. We all love ourselves faithfully — intensely. We love ourselves better than anything else — better than our neighbor — than virtue — than God.

Now, Christ our Lord, by redemption, made us the sons of God; “and he gave them power to become sons of God.” As such, we must be different from the old, the natural man, in spirit — that is, in thoughts, in desires, in affections, in views, in conduct. This the Apostle clearly points out when he says, “The first man was of the earth — earthly; the second man is from heaven — heavenly. Such as is the earthly such also are the earthly, and such as is the heavenly such also are they that are heavenly, Therefore, as we have borne the image of the earthly, let us bear also the image of the heavenly.” But before we can thus put on the image of the heavenly man, so as to be made conformable to the Lord Jesus Christ — in a word, before we become Christians, — we must cast away from us the old man, the human spirit, and hence poverty of spirit is the beginning, the foundation, of the Christian character. Faith is “the substance of things to be hoped for,” consequently, future blessings; “the conviction of things that appear not,” consequently, things not to be apprehended by the senses; for, says the Apostle, “Per fidem ambulamus, et non per speciem.” ‘We walk by faith and not by sight.’ (2 Corinth 5:7)

The man of faith is he who has views and desires beyond and above this world and sense, who makes not the things of sense the last and great object of his wishes and desires; who uses not at all the things that are, when they cross or impede his eternal interest (in other words, when they are sinful), and in the things which he uses has something in view beyond what is seen, and makes all that is created subservient to the uncreated, all that is temporal conducive to that which is eternal, all that is of earth serviceable for that which is heavenly. Such is the man of faith. Oh, glorious man, like to the Son of God!
