

Union With God

Thoughts For All Times

By Monsignor J. Vaughan.
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One of the saddest and most deplorable facts forced upon our attention at the present day is the extraordinary little interest in man's salvation exhibited by people living in the world. We are not now referring to Anglicans, Presbyterians, Wesleyans, Baptists, Pentecostals, Methodists and others who are dwelling in the twilight of heresy. We refer to Catholics who live and bask in the full brilliancy of the light of Divine truth, and who might, therefore, be expected to be more filled with apostolic charity, and more inflamed with zeal for the hundreds of thousands perishing in their very midst.

It is only natural that a man, who is at no pains to learn the unspeakable value of his own soul, should set but a low price upon the souls of his neighbors. One who is making no notable effort to ward off sin and defilement from himself and to preserve himself from every stain, is not likely to put himself out to any great extent to rescue his neighbors from contagion. Nor will a lukewarm Catholic, who displays no ardent aspirations and longings after perfection and a greater union with God, develop any marked zeal for the sanctification of his fellows.

No, we must commence with ourselves. "Well-ordered charity begins at home," as Saint Thomas teaches. We must start with a strong sense of the exalted dignity and measureless greatness and beauty of our own soul when in a state of grace; we must grow familiar with the fact that it is veritably a child of heaven, an adopted son of God, a brother of Jesus Christ, and an heir to an everlasting throne, and a participator of the Divine nature. Then, but not till then, shall we be in a condition to appreciate at the same time the dignity and value of the souls of our brethren, made, as our own, to the image and likeness of God; and, as our own, purchased by the blood of an infinite Victim. When once that startling truth is borne in upon us we shall certainly be the first to admit that no work or employment is so grand and ennobling in itself, so pleasing and gratifying to God, so honorable to ourselves or so profitable to others, as that which may promote the eternal welfare of the race.

Some Catholic laymen seem to think that such reflections have no application except to bishops, priests, monks and nuns, and to persons especially consecrated to God. What a mistake! Are not the multitudes scattered throughout the world their brethren as well as ours, and just as truly as they are, children of the one Eternal Father above? Are they not equally redeemed by the same saving Blood, and destined to the same sublime honors and rewards in the realms of fadeless glory in heaven? And have they not as much right to claim the interests and sympathy and solicitude of Catholic laymen as of priests and monks? Or, are lay people to watch the ravages of sin, and to contemplate the sea of iniquity raging on all sides, and souls perishing before their eyes, and to extend no hand to help a drowning brother, and to make no effort to rescue the perishing? In the midst of this wild, tempest-tossed, wind-swept, storm-driven world, are lay people to sit idly by, and fold their arms

unconcerned, and throw the entire responsibility and care upon the priests? No! To look upon the cross of Christ, and to witness what He suffered for man's redemption, is to feel the necessity of co-operating with Him to the utmost of one's power. All good laymen feel the truth of this when it is properly put before them. What many need is merely that someone should point out to them what they might do, and the value of the least work undertaken for the spiritual welfare of their neighbors.

They often ask, in diffident tones: "Ah! Yes; but what can we do? We can neither preach, nor absolve, nor offer up the Adorable Sacrifice. We can effect so little."

It might be retorted — Because you can do but little, is that any reason why you should do nothing? But, in sober truth, there is nothing little in any act or word that contributes, however slightly, to a soul's salvation; nothing trivial, nothing insignificant; nay, on the contrary, the smallest act is of inestimable value. And this is what, it appears to me, they should be made to realize. Is it not a great thing to enrich the poor; to feed the multitudes; to cure diseases; to still tempests; to create worlds; or to build up a universe? If so, it is a far greater thing still to diminish sin; to draw souls to God; to extend the faith; and to engraft virtue and eradicate vice. How clearly the saints understood this! "To make one step in the propagation of the faith," says the generous-hearted Saint Teresa, "and to give one ray of light to heretics, I would forfeit a thousand kingdoms!" (See her Life, chapter 21.).

It is of faith that one deliberate venial fault is an immeasurably worse evil than all physical pains, and than all material loss that man can sustain in this life; and far more deserving of tears and lamentations. If this be absolutely certain it must be at least equally certain that to labor to diminish sin, infidelity, religious indifference, and neglect of spiritual duties, is a work of the very highest value and importance. If by the end of our lives, we have succeeded in reducing the sum total of sins against God but by one, we shall not have lived in vain. Yet, if in earnest, the least influential amongst us may do vastly more than that.

And how? The earnest layman may inquire. Then let me answer.

First, by preaching. Not in words, not in rounded periods, and balanced sentences, and rich sonorous phrases, but by the far more efficacious means of example. No words are half so eloquent or half so persuasive as facts. A good life is a continuous exhortation. No man can live among men as a true, fervent, practical, honest and sober Catholic without doing incalculable good. It is impossible. The mere presence of a noble, upright, generous character, who would scorn to do a mean, unworthy action, is itself a spur and an incentive to virtue. Such a man inspires respect, admiration and reverence; and from admiration and reverence, to imitation and emulation, there is but a short and easy step. We instinctively seek to imitate what we admire, and to resemble those whom we esteem and honor.

Secondly, by showing, in a practical manner, some real interest and concern in the spiritual welfare of others, and desiring to be of use to them. Opportunities arise again and again of helping inquirers and assisting the spread of truth; explaining difficulties, dissipating doubts, answering objections, interpreting apparent contradictions; and, in a word, of giving a clear and intelligible account of the faith that they profess. If Catholic laymen could be persuaded to interest themselves more in studying the Apologetics, the *motiva credibilitatis*, (the motives or reasons of credibility) the history of the Church, and of the Church's doctrine, and a score of kindred subjects, they might render invaluable service to souls.

Thirdly, by employing more generously in the service of the brethren whatever special gifts and talents they may possess. How much might be done by possessors of large fortunes to advance the reign of Christ upon earth! What real assistance they might render to struggling missions, poverty-stricken churches, and schools, and to institutions at home, as well as to the important missionary enterprises in far distant and inhospitable lands! Much, no doubt, is lost by the injudicious application of charity; and much is spent to carry out a whim or a personal hobby, which might have been laid out to far greater advantage, so far as souls are concerned. But of this, we will not now speak.

Others, again, who are blessed with intellectual gifts — with learning, leisure and ability — might, surely, find abundant scope and occupation for their talents in other directions. To show what we mean we need but mention such names as Henry Digby Beste, Thomas William Allies, W. G. (William George) Ward, E. H. (Edward Healy) Thompson, Charles F. B. Allnatt (the author), among Englishmen, the American O. A. (Orestes Augustus) Brownson, five Frenchmen namely [Blessed Frederic] F. Ozanam, Baron Gaston Jean Baptiste De Renty, Jean de Bernieres de Louvigny, [the Venerable Leo] Du Pont (the holy man of Tours), the Comte Adrien Albert Marie de Mun, or the German the late Herr Ludwig Windthorst [1812-1891], to whom might be added very many others, and women as well as men. (Note: The zeal and devotion, even of certain non-Catholics, such as the late Lord Shaftesbury (Anthony Ashley Cooper, 7th Earl of Shaftesbury, 1801-1885) and the Quakeress Mrs. Elizabeth Fry, might bring a blush to many a Catholic.)

Fourthly, by throwing themselves generously into every good movement that is started with the approbation of authority, and uniting their efforts with those of others to make it a success.

How frequently it happens that some enterprise, excellent in itself, and admirably conceived and planned, nevertheless proves abortive and fails because Catholics prefer to criticize rather than to co-operate, and to raise objections rather than to raise subscriptions. It would be impossible to enumerate the various useful works and ventures to which the past five and twenty or fifty years have given birth, and which require the zeal and generosity of the faithful if they are to continue to succeed; but perhaps we may venture to mention one or two as specimens of the rest. There is, for example, the Catholic Truth Society. It does an admirable work. And it may be helped in such a variety of ways. The rich may aid it by donations; the learned and leisured by writing tracts, papers and essays; the poor by buying the leaflets, which cost next to nothing, and scattering them among their friends and acquaintances; and all by speaking well of it and wishing it God-speed.

Then there are Catholic papers which need support; and from time to time series of instructive lectures or addresses are arranged which (a) some might assist in delivering; which (b) others might encourage by attending, and which (c) all could help by advertising and making known among their companions.

In fact, to one who ardently desires to help his brethren, thousands of ways lie open.

Fifthly, by encouraging and fostering religious and priestly vocations among the young. When parents are true, fervent Christians themselves, and Catholics to their very heart's core, they will certainly realize how unspeakable and unparalleled an honor and blessing it is to be able to reckon among their children at least one or two consecrated and dedicated to God and the service of the altar.

Such parents will strive, by the simple force of word and example, to infuse their own spirit into their offspring, and again and again, their ardent and continued prayers will obtain for son or

daughter the gift of a supernatural vocation. The extraordinary thing is — first, that even fathers and mothers who are supposed to estimate spiritual things with some degree of accuracy should often be so little anxious to see their children raised to the sublimest of all dignities, namely, to the unapproachable dignity of the priesthood; and, secondly, that even among the better class of young men themselves so few should be stirred by this noblest form of ambition.

“The real misery of the Church,” Cardinal Mermillod justly observes, “is to see how young men of the upper classes seem to be incapable of anything better than driving a golf ball, shooting at birds, or applauding an actress. The honor of taking and holding the Blood of Jesus Christ is not given to them. Whole generations pass away before a family gives one son to the Church. Christian women!” he exclaims, “your mother hearts do not burn enough with Divine love that their exhalations should bring forth the heart of a priest. Oh! ask of God that your families may give sons to the Church... ask Him that you, in your turn, may have the courage of sacrifice, and that from you may be born an apostle: to speak to men about God, to enlighten the world, to serve Him at the altar. Is not this, after all, a grand and magnificent destiny?” (See Mermillod on The Supernatural Life). Truly a more magnificent one does not exist.

“It is beautiful that a man stand and speak of spiritual things to men. It is the sentiment of even the wise old cynic of Chelsea. “A man even professing, and never so languidly making still some endeavor to save the souls of men; contrast him with a man professing to do little but shoot the partridges of men!” Yes, indeed.” (See: Past and Present, book 4, chapter 1, page 208.)

The last, but by no means the least important, means of co-operating with Jesus Christ in the work of saving souls, is frequent and fervent prayer. “The continuous prayer of a just man avails much.” To assist one another in this way is, indeed, a sacred duty; it is a special exhortation of the Apostle: “Pray for one another, that you may be saved.” It is, furthermore, suggested by our Lord Himself when He teaches us to say, not, “deliver me,” but “deliver us from evil,” and not “lead me,” but “lead us not into temptation,” and so forth.

It appears that we priests do not take sufficient pains to impress upon the faithful the duty of laboring according to their opportunities for the salvation of souls; nor do we sufficiently encourage them by pointing out and insisting again and again on the real value of the least act performed with this end in view. Perhaps if we were more zealous ourselves we should be more careful and solicitous to secure the valuable co-operation of every good man and woman, and more anxious to instill into them an active and self-sacrificing charity. *Qui non ardet, non accedit.* (He who does not ardently desire, does not ascend.) If we are to lead others to exert and strain themselves in this Divine and inestimably grand work, it is imperative that we first lead the way, and by vigorous action rather than by speech. “Not the cry, but the flight of the wild duck,” says the Chinese proverb, “leads the flock to fly and to follow.”
