

THE SERMONS OF ST. JOHN MARY VIANNEY

NO. 2

THEY ARE FOR THE WORLD

One section, and perhaps it is the largest section, of people everywhere are wholly wrapped up in the things of this world. And of this large number there are those who are content to have suppressed all feeling of religion, all thought of another life, who have done everything in their power to efface the terrible thought of the judgment which one day they will have to undergo. They employ all their wiles, and often their wealth, during the course of their lives to attract to their way of life as many people as they can. They no longer believe in anything. They even take a pride in making themselves out to be more impious and incredulous than they really are in order to convince others and to make them believe, not in the verities, but in the falsehoods which they wish to take root in the hearts of those under their influence.

Voltaire, in the course of a dinner given one day for his friends—that is, for the impious—rejoiced that of all those present, there was not one who believed in religion. And yet he himself did believe, as he was to show at the hour of his death.

Then he demanded with great earnestness that a priest should be brought to him that he might make his peace with God.

But it was too late. God, against whom he had fought and spoken with such fury all his life, dealt with him as He had with Antiochus: He abandoned him to the fury of the devils. At that dread moment, Voltaire had only despair and the thought of eternal damnation as his lot. The Holy Ghost tells us: "The fool hath said in his heart: There is no God." But it is only the corruption of his heart which could carry man to such an excess; he does not believe it in the depths of his soul. The words "There is a God" will never entirely disappear. The greatest sinner will often utter them without even thinking of what he is saying. But let us leave these blasphemous people aside. Happily, though you may not be as good Christians as you ought to be, thanks be to God you are not of that company. But, you will say to me, who are these people who are partly on God's side and partly on the side of the world? Well, my dear children, let me describe them. I will compare them (if I may dare to make use of the term) to dogs who will run to the first person who calls them. You may follow them from the morning to the evening, from the beginning of the year to the end. These people look upon Sunday as merely a day for rest and amusement. They stay in bed longer than on weekdays, and instead of giving themselves to God with all their hearts, they do not even think of Him. Some of them will be thinking of their amusements, others of people they expect to meet, still others of the sales they are about to make or the money they will be spending or receiving. With great difficulty they will manage the Sign of the Cross in some fashion or another. Because they will be going to church later, they will omit their prayers altogether, saying: "Oh, I'll have plenty of time to say them before Mass." They always have something to do before setting out for Mass, and although they have been planning to say their prayers before setting out, they are barely in time for the beginning of the Mass itself. If they meet a friend along the road, it is no trouble to them to bring him back home and put off the Mass until a later hour. But since they still want to appear Christian, they will go to Mass sometime later, though it will be with infinite boredom and reluctance. The thought in their minds will be: "Oh, Lord, will this ever be over!" You will see them in church, especially during the instruction, looking around from one side to the other, asking the person next to them for the time, and so on.

More of them yawn and stretch and turn the pages of their prayer book as if they were examining it in order to see whether the printer had made any mistakes. There are others, and you can see them sleeping as soundly as if they were in a comfortable bed. The first thought that comes to them when they awake is not that they have been profaning so holy a place but: "Oh, Lord, this will never be over.... I'm not coming back any more." And finally there are those to whom the word of God (which has converted so many sinners) is actually nauseating. They are obliged to go out, they say, to get a breath of air or else they would die. You will see them, distressed and miserable, during the services. But no sooner is the service over (and often even before the priest has actually left the altar) than they will be pressing around the door from which the first of the congregation are streaming out, and you will notice that all the joy which

they had lost during the service has come back again. They are so tired that often they have not the "strength" to come back to the evening service. If you were to ask them why they were not coming to this, they would tell you: "Ah, we would have to be all the day in the church. We have other things to do."

For such people there is no question of instruction, nor of the Rosary, nor of evening prayers. They look upon all these things as of no consequence. If you asked them what had been said during the instruction, they would say: "He did too much shouting.... He bored us to death.... I can't remember anything else about it.... If it hadn't been so long, it might have been easier to remember some of it.... That is just what keeps the world away from religious services—they are too long."

It is quite right to say "the world" because these people belong to the camp of "the worldly," although they do not know it. But now we shall try to make them understand things a little better (at least if they want to). But, being deaf and blind (as they are), it is very difficult to make them understand the words of life or to comprehend their own unhappy fate.

To begin with, they never make the Sign of the Cross before a meal or say Grace afterwards, nor do they recite the Angelus. If, as a result of some old habit or training, they still observe these practices and you should happen to see the manner in which they carry them out, you would feel sick: the women will simultaneously be getting on with their work or calling to their children or members of the household; the men will be turning a hat or a cap around in their hands as if searching for holes. They think as much about God as if they really believed that He did not exist at all and that they were doing all this for a joke. They have no scruples about buying or selling on the holy day of Sunday, even though they know, or at least they should know, that dealing on a reasonably big scale on a Sunday, when there is no necessity for it, is a mortal sin. Such people regard all such facts as trifles. They will go into a parish on a holy day to hire labourers, and if you told them they were doing wrong, they would reply: "We must go when we can find them there." They have no problem, either, about paying their taxes on a Sunday because during the week they might have to go a little further and take a few moments longer to complete the job. "Ah," you will say to me, "we wouldn't think much of all that." You would not think much of all that, my dear people, and I am not at all surprised, because you are worldly. You would like to be followers of God and at the same time to satisfy the standards of the world. Do you realise, my children, who these people are? They are the people who have not entirely lost the faith and to whom there still remains some attachment to the service of God, the people who do not want to give up all religious practices, for indeed, they themselves find fault with those who do not go often to the services, but they have not enough courage to break with the world and to turn to God's side. They do not wish to be damned, but neither do they wish to inconvenience themselves too much. They hope that they will be saved without having to do too much violence to themselves. They have the idea that God, being so good, did not create them for perdition and that He will pardon them in spite of everything; that the time will come when they will turn over to God; that they will correct their faults and abandon all their bad habits. If, in moments of reflection, they pass their petty lives before their eyes, they will lament for their faults, and sometimes they will even weep for them....

What a very tragic life such people lead, my children, who want to follow the ways of the world without ceasing to be the children of God. Let us go on a little further and you will be able to understand this a little more clearly and to see for yourselves how stupid indeed such a life can be. At one moment you will hear the people who lead it praying or making an act of contrition, and the next moment you will hear them, if something is not going the way they want it, swearing or maybe even using the holy name of God. This morning you may have seen them at Mass, singing or listening to the praises of God, and on the very same day you will hear them giving vent to the most scandalous utterances. They will dip their hands in holy water and ask God to purify them from their sins; a little later they will be using those very hands in an impure way upon themselves or upon others. The same eyes which this morning had the great happiness of contemplating Jesus Christ in the Blessed Sacrament will in the course of the day voluntarily rest with pleasure upon the most immodest objects.

Yesterday you saw a certain man doing an act of charity or a service for a neighbour; today he will be doing his best to cheat that neighbour if he can profit thereby. A moment ago this mother desired all sorts of blessings for her children, and now, because they are annoying her, she will shower all sorts of curses upon them: she wishes she might never see them again, that she was miles away from them, and ends up by consigning them to the Devil to rid herself

of them! At one moment she sends her children to Mass or Confession; at another, she will be sending them to the dance or, at least, she will pretend not to know that they are there or forbid them to go with a laugh which is tantamount to permission to go. At one time she will be telling her daughter to be reserved and not to mix with bad companions, and at another she will allow her to pass whole hours with young men without saying a word. It's no use, my poor mother, you are on the side of the world! You think yourself to be on God's side by reason of some exterior show of religion which you make.

You are mistaken; you belong to that number of whom Jesus Christ has said: "Woe to the world..."

You see these people who think they are following God but who are really living up to the maxims of the world. They have no scruples about taking from their neighbour wood or fruit or a thousand and one other things. Whenever they are flattered for what they do for religion, they derive quite a lot of pleasure from their actions. They will be quite keen then and will be delighted to give good advice to others. But let them be subjected to any contempt or calumny and you will see them become discouraged and distressed because they have been treated in this way. Yesterday they wanted only to do good to anyone who did them harm, but today they can hardly tolerate such people, and often they cannot even endure to see them or to speak to them.

Poor worldlings! How unhappy you are! Go on with your daily round; you have nothing to hope for but Hell! Some would like to go to the Sacraments at least once a year, but for that, it is necessary to find an easygoing confessor. They would like if only—and there is the whole problem. If they find a confessor who sees that their dispositions are not good and he refuses them Absolution, you will then find them thundering against him, justifying themselves for all they are worth for having tried and failed to obtain the Sacrament. They will speak evil about him. They know very well why they have been refused and left in their sinful state, but, as they know, too, the confessor can do nothing to grant them what they want, so they get satisfaction by saying anything they wish.

Carry on, children of this world, carry on with your daily round; you will see a day you never wished to see! It would seem then that we must divide our hearts in two! But no, my friends, that is not the case; all for God or all for the world.

You would like to frequent the Sacraments? Very well, then, give up the dances and the cabarets and the unseemly amusements. Today you have sufficient grace to come here and present yourselves at the tribunal of Penance, to kneel before the Holy Table, to partake of the Bread of the Angels. In three or four weeks, maybe less, you will be seen passing your night among drunken men, and what is more, you will be seen indulging in the most horrible acts of impurity. Carry on, children of this world; you will soon be in Hell! They will teach you there what you should have done to get to Heaven, which you have lost entirely through your own fault....

Woe betide you, children of this world! Carry on; follow your master as you have done up to the present! Very soon you will see clearly that you have been mistaken in following his ways. But will that make you any wiser? No, my children, it will not. If someone cheats us once, we say: "We will not trust him any more—and with good reason." The world cheats us continually and yet we love it." Love not the world, nor the things which are in the world," St. John warns us. Ah, my dear children, if we gave some thought to what the world really is, we should pass all our lives in bidding it farewell. When one reaches the age of fifteen years, one has said farewell to the pastimes of childhood; one has come to look upon them as trifling and ephemeral, as one would the actions of children building houses of cards or sand castles. At thirty, one has begun to put behind one the consuming pleasures of passionate youth. What gave such intense pleasure in younger days is already beginning to weary. Let us go further, my dear children, and say that every day we are bidding farewell to the world.

We are like travellers who enjoy the beauty of the countryside through which they are passing. No sooner do they see it than it is time for them to leave it behind. It is exactly the same with the pleasures and the good things to which we become so attached. Then we arrive at the edge of eternity, which engulfs all these things in its abyss.

It is then, my dear brethren, that the world will disappear forever from our eyes and that we shall recognise our folly in having been so attached to it. And all that has been said to us about sin! Then we shall say: It was all true.

Alas, I lived only for the world, I sought nothing but the world in all I did, and now the pleasures and the joys of the world are not for me any longer! They are all slipping away from me—this world which I have loved so well, these joys, these pleasures which have so fully occupied my heart and my soul! Now I must return to my God!

How consoling this thought is, my dear children, for him who has sought only God throughout his life! But what a despairing thought for him who has lost sight of God and of the salvation of his soul!
