

THE SERMONS OF ST. JOHN MARY VIANNEY

NO. 3

HAVE YOU RELIGION IN YOUR HEART?

Alas, my dear brethren, what have we become even since our conversion? Instead of going always forward and increasing in holiness, what laziness and what indifference we display! God cannot endure this perpetual inconstancy with which we pass from virtue to vice and from vice to virtue. Tell me, my children, is not this the very pattern of the way you live? Are your poor lives anything other than a succession of good deeds and bad deeds? Is it not true that you go to Confession and the very next day you fall again—or perhaps the very same day? How can this be, unless the religion you have is unreal, a religion of habit, a religion of long-standing custom, and not a religion rooted in the heart? Carry on, my friend; you are only a waverer! Carry on, my poor man; in everything you do, you are just a hypocrite and nothing else! God has not the first place in your heart; that is reserved for the world and the devil. How many people there are, my dear children, who seem to love God in real earnest for a little while and then abandon Him! What do you find, then, so hard and so unpleasant in the service of God that it has repelled you so strangely and caused you to change over to the side of the world? Yet at the time when God showed you the state of your soul, you actually wept for it and realised how much you had been mistaken in your lives. If you have persevered so little, the reason for this misfortune is that the devil must have been greatly grieved to have lost you because he has done so much to get you back. He hopes now to keep you altogether. How many apostates there are, indeed, who have renounced their religion and who are Christians in name only!

But, you will say to me, how can we know that we have religion in our hearts, this religion which is consistent?

My dear brethren, this is how: listen well and you will understand if you have religion as God wants you to have it in order to lead you to Heaven. If a person has true virtue, nothing whatever can change him; he is like a rock in the midst of a tempestuous sea. If anyone scorns you, or calumniates you, if someone mocks at you or calls you a hypocrite or a sanctimonious fraud, none of this will have the least effect upon your peace of soul. You will love him just as much as you loved him when he was saying good things about you. You will not fail to do him a good turn and to help him, even if he speaks badly of your assistance. You will say your prayers, go to Confession, to Holy Communion, you will go to Mass, all according to your general custom.

To help you to understand this better, I will give you an example. It is related that in a certain parish there was a young man who was a model of virtue. He went to Mass almost every day and to Holy Communion often. It happened that another was jealous of the esteem in which this young man was held, and one day, when they were both in the company of a neighbour, who possessed a lovely gold snuffbox, the jealous one took it from its owner's pocket and placed it, unobserved, in the pocket of the young man. After he had done this, without pretending anything, he asked to see the snuffbox. The owner expected to find it in his pocket and was astonished when he discovered that it was missing. No one was allowed to leave the room until everyone had been searched, and the snuffbox was found, of course, on the young man who was a model of goodness. Naturally, everyone immediately called him a thief and attacked his religious professions, denouncing him as a hypocrite and a sanctimonious fraud. He could not defend himself, since the box had been found in his pocket. He said nothing. He suffered it all as something which had come from the hand of God. When he was walking along the street, when he was coming from the church, or from Mass or Holy Communion, everyone who saw him jeered at him and called him a hypocrite, a fraud, a thief. This went on for quite a long time, but in spite of it, he continued with all of his religious exercises, his Confessions, his Communion, and all of his prayers, just as if everyone were treating him with the utmost respect. After some years, the man who had been the cause of it all fell ill. To those who were with him he confessed that he had been the origin of all the evil things which had been said about this young man, who was a saint, and that through jealousy of him, so that he might destroy his good name, he himself had put the snuffbox in the young man's pocket.

There, my brethren, is a religion which is true, which has taken root in the soul. Tell me, if all of those poor Christians who make profession of religion were subjected to such trials, would they imitate this young man? Ah, my dear brethren, what murmurings there would be, what bitternesses, what thoughts of revenge, of slander, of calumny,

even perhaps of going to law.... They would storm against religion; they would scorn and jeer at it and say nothing but ill of it; they would not be able to say their prayers any more; they would not be able to go to Mass; they would not know what more to do or to say to justify themselves; they would collect every item of harm that this or that person had done, tell it to others, repeat it to everyone who knew them in order to make them out as liars and calumniators. What is the reason for this conduct, my dear brethren? Surely it is that our religion is only one of whim, of long-standing habit and routine, and, if we were to put it more forcefully, because we are hypocrites who serve God just as long as everything is going according to our wishes. Alas, my dear brethren, all of these virtues which we observe in a great many apparent Christians are but like the flowers of spring, which one gust of hot wind can wither.

LOST WORKS

How is it, my dear brethren, that so few Christians behave with one end only in view—to please God? Here is the reason, pure and simple. It is just that the vast majority of Christians are enveloped in the most shocking ignorance, so that, humanly speaking, they really do the very best they can.

The result is that if you were to compare their intentions with those of pagans, you would not find any difference. Ah, dear Lord, how many good works are lost for Heaven! Others who are a little better informed are interested only in the esteem of their fellow men, and they try to dissemble as much as they can: their exterior seems good, while interiorly they are filled with duplicity and evil.

Yes, my dear brethren, we shall see at the Judgment that the largest section of Christians practiced a religion of whim or caprice only—that is to say, the greatest number of them practiced their religion merely from motives of routine, and very few sought God alone in what they did.

WE ARE WRETCHED CREATURES

We cannot dwell upon the conduct of the Jews, my dear people, without being struck with amazement. These very people had waited for God for four thousand years, they had prayed much because of the great desire they had to receive Him, and yet when He came, He could not find a single person to give Him the poorest lodging. The all-powerful God was obliged to make His dwelling with the animals.

And yet, my dear people, I find in the conduct of the Jews, criminal as it was, not a subject for explanations, but a theme for the condemnation of the conduct of the majority of Christians. We can see that the Jews had formed an idea of their Redeemer which did not conform with the state of austerity in which He appeared. It seemed as if they could not persuade themselves that this could indeed be He who was to be their Saviour; St. Paul tells us very clearly that if the Jews had recognised Him as God, they would never have put Him to death. There is, then, some small excuse for the Jews. But what excuse can we make, my dear brethren, for the coldness and the contempt which we show towards Jesus Christ? Oh, yes, we do indeed truly believe that Jesus Christ came upon earth, that He provided the most convincing proofs of His divinity. Hence the reason for our hope. We rejoice, and we have good reason to recognise Jesus Christ as our God, our Saviour, and our Model. Here is the foundation of our faith. But, tell me, with all this, what homage do we really pay Him? Do we do more for Him than if we did not believe all this? Tell me, dear brethren, does our conduct correspond at all to our beliefs? We are wretched creatures.

We are even more blameworthy than the Jews.

ROUTINE FOLLOWERS

Ah, dear lord, what blindness! oh, ugly sin of hypocrisy which leads souls to hell with actions which, if they had been performed from genuine motives, would have brought them to Heaven! Unfortunately, such a large body of Christians do not know themselves and do not even try to know themselves. They follow routines and habits, and they do not want to see reason. They are blind, and they move along in their blindness. If a priest wants to tell them about the state they are in, they do not listen, and if they go through the pretence of listening, they will do nothing at all about what they are told.

This state, my dear people, is the most unhappy state that anyone can possibly imagine, and it is perhaps the most dangerous one as well.

THE WORLD IS EVERYTHING AND GOD IS NOTHING!

If people would do for God what they do for the world, my dear people, what a great number of Christians would go to Heaven! But if you, dear children, had to pass three or four hours praying in a church, as you pass them at a dance or in a cabaret, how heavily the time would press upon you! If you had to go to a great many different places in order to hear a sermon, as you go for your pastimes or to satisfy your avarice and greed, what pretexts there would be, and how many detours would be taken to avoid going at all. But nothing is too much trouble when done for the world. What is more, people are not afraid of losing either God or their souls or Heaven. With what good reason did Jesus Christ, my dear people, say that the children of this world are more zealous in serving their master, the world, than the children of light are in serving theirs, who is God. To our shame, we must admit that people fear neither expense, nor even going into debt, when it is a matter of satisfying their pleasures, but if some poor person asks them for help, they have nothing at all. This is true of so many: they have everything for the world and nothing at all for God because to them, the world is everything and God is nothing.

FOLLOW ONE MASTER ONLY

What a sad life does he lead who wants both to please the world and to serve God! It is a great mistake to make, my friends. Apart from the fact that you are going to be unhappy all the time, you can never attain the stage at which you will be able to please the world and please God. It is as impossible a feat as trying to put an end to eternity. Take the advice that I am going to give you now and you will be less unhappy: give yourselves wholly to God or else wholly to the world. Do not look for and do not serve more than one master, and once you have chosen the one you are going to follow, do not leave him. You surely remember what Jesus Christ said to you in the Gospel: you cannot serve God and Mammon; that is to say, you cannot follow the world and the pleasures of the world and Jesus Christ with His Cross. Of course you would be quite willing to follow God just so far and the world just so far! Let me put it even more clearly: you would like it if your conscience, if your heart, would allow you to go to the altar in the morning and the dance in the evening; to spend part of the day in church and the remainder in the cabarets or other places of amusement; to talk of God at one moment and the next to tell obscene stories or utter calumnies about your neighbour; to do a good turn for your next-door neighbour on one occasion and on some other to do him harm; in other words, to do good and speak well when you are with good people and to do wrong when you are in bad company.

WE ARE EXTRAORDINARILY BLIND

We must certainly be extraordinarily blind because when all is said and done, there is not a single person who could say that he is ready to appear before Jesus Christ.

Yet in spite of the fact that we are quite aware of this, here is still not one among us who will take a single step nearer to God. Dear Lord, how blind the sinner is! How pitiable is his lot! My dear children, let us not live like fools any longer, for at the moment when we least expect it, Jesus Christ will knock at our door. How happy then will be the person who has not been waiting until that very moment to prepare himself for Him.

That is what I wish you to be.

NOT LIKE THE OTHERS

I am not like the others! That, my dear brethren, is the usual tone of false virtue and the attitude of those proud people who, always quite satisfied with themselves, are at all times ready to censure and to criticise the conduct of others. That, too, is the attitude of the rich, who look upon the poor as if they were of a different race or nature from them and who behave towards them accordingly.

Let us go one better, my dear brethren, and admit that it is the attitude of most of the world. There are very few people, even in the lowliest conditions, who do not have a good opinion of themselves. They regard themselves as far superior to their equals, and their detestable pride urges them to believe that they are indeed worth a great deal more than most other people. From this I conclude that pride is the source of all the vices and the cause of all the evils which have occurred, and which are still to come, in the course of the centuries. We carry our blindness so far that

often we even glorify ourselves on account of things which really ought to cover us with confusion. Some derive a great deal of pride because they believe that they have more intelligence than others; others because they have a few more inches of land or some money, when in fact they should be in dread of the formidable account which God will demand of them one day. Oh, my dear brethren, if only some of them felt the need to say the prayer that St. Augustine addressed to God: "My God, teach me to know myself for what I am and I shall have no need of anything else to cover me with confusion and scorn for myself."

We could say that this sin is found everywhere, that it accompanies man in what he does and says. It is like a kind of seasoning or flavouring which can be tasted in every portion of a dish. Listen to me for a moment and you can see this for yourselves. Our Lord gives us an example in the Gospel when He tells us of the Pharisee who went up into the temple to pray and, standing up where all could see him, said in a loud voice: "O God, I give thee thanks that I am not as the rest of men steeped in sin. I spend my life doing good and pleasing you."

Herein consists the very nature of the proud man: instead of thanking God for condescending to make use of him for a good purpose and for giving him grace, he looks upon whatever good he does as something which comes from himself, not from God. Let us go into a few details and you will see that there are hardly any exceptions to this general sin of pride. The old and the young, the rich and the poor, all suffer from it. Each and everyone congratulates himself and flatters himself because of what he is or of what he does -- or rather because of what he is not and what he does not. Everyone applauds himself and loves also to be applauded. Everyone rushes to solicit the praises of the rest of the world, and everyone strives to draw them to himself. In this way are the lives of the great majority of people passed.

The door by which pride enters with the greatest ease and strength is the door of wealth. Just as soon as someone improves his possessions and his sources of wealth, you will observe him change his mode of life. He will act as Jesus Christ told us the Pharisees liked to act: these people love to be called master and to have people saluting them. They like the first places. They begin to appear in better clothes. They leave behind their air of simplicity. If you salute them, they will, with difficulty, nod to you without raising their hats.

Walking with their heads in the air, they will study to find the finest words for everything, though quite often they do not even know the meaning of the words, and they love to repeat them. In order to show that his wealth has been increased, this man will make your head swim with stories of the legacies he is going to receive. Others are preoccupied with their labours to become highly esteemed and praised. If one of them has succeeded in some undertaking, he will rush to make it known as widely as possible so that his would-be wisdom and cleverness may be spread far and wide. If another has said something which has gained approval or interest, he will deafen everyone he knows with repetition of it, until they are bored to death and make fun of him. If such vain and boastful people do any travelling at all, you will hear them exaggerating a hundred times all that they said and did to such an extent that you feel sorry for the people who have to listen to them. They think that they appear very brilliant, though people are scoffing at them in secret. No one can stop them from talking about themselves: one well known braggart convinced himself that people believed everything he said!

Observe a person of some standing scrutinising the work of someone else. He will find a hundred faults with it and will say: "Ah, what can you expect? He does not know any better!"

But since the proud person never depreciates the merit of someone else without increasing his own importance, he will hurry on then to speak of some work which he has done, which So-and-So has considered so well executed that he has talked about it to many others.

Take a young woman who has a shapely figure or who, at any rate, thinks she has.

You see her walking along, picking her steps, full of affectation, with a pride which seems colossal enough to reach the clouds! If she has plenty of clothes, she will leave her wardrobe open so that they can be seen. People take pride in their animals and in their households. They take pride in knowing how to go to Confession properly, in saying their prayers, in behaving modestly and decorously in the church. A mother takes pride from her children. You will hear a landowner whose fields are in better condition than those of his neighbours criticising these and applauding his own superior knowledge. Or it may be a young man with a watch, or perhaps only the chain, and a couple of coins in his pocket, and you will hear him saying, "I did not know that it was so late," so that people will see him looking at the watch or will know that he has one. You may observe a man gambling; he may have but two coins to spare, but he

will have all he possesses in his hand, and sometimes even what is not his. Or indeed, he will even pretend that he has more than he really has. How many people even borrow, either money or clothes, just to go to places of gambling or other kinds of pleasure.

No, my dear brethren, there is nothing that is quite as ridiculous or stupid as to be forever talking about what we have or what we do. Just listen to the father of a family when his children are of an age to get married; in all the places and gatherings where he is to be found you will hear him saying: "I have so many thousand francs ready; my business will give me so many thousands, etc."

But if later he is asked for a few coppers for the poor, he has nothing.

If a tailor or a dressmaker has made a success of a coat or a frock and someone seeing the wearer pass says, "That looks very well. I wonder who made it?" they will make very sure to observe: "Oh, I made that."

Why? So that everyone may know how skilful they are.

But if the garment had not been such a success, they would, of course, take good care to say nothing, for fear of being humiliated.

And I will add this to what I have just said. This sin is even more to be feared in people who put on a good show of piety and religion.

THE EVIL TONGUES

There are some who, through envy, for that is what it amounts to, belittle and slander others, especially those in the same business or profession as their own, in order to draw business to themselves. They will say such evil things as "their merchandise is worthless" or "they cheat"; that they have nothing at home and that it would be impossible to give goods away at such a price; that there have been many complaints about these goods; that they will give no value or wear or whatever it is, or even that it is short weight, or not the right length, and so on. A workman will say that another man is not a good worker, that he is always changing his job, that people are not satisfied with him, or that he does no work, that he only puts in his time, or perhaps that he does not know how to work.

"What I was telling you there," they will then add, "it would be better to say nothing about it. He might lose by it, you know."

"Is that so?" you answer." It would have been better if you yourself had said nothing. That would have been the thing to do."

A farmer will observe that his neighbour's property is doing better than his own. This makes him very angry so he will speak evil of him. There are others who slander their neighbours from motives of vengeance. If you do or say something to help someone, even through reasons of duty or of charity, they will then look for opportunities to decry you, to think up things which will harm you, in order to revenge themselves. If their neighbour is well spoken of, they will be very annoyed and will tell you: "He is just like everyone else. He has his own faults. He has done this, he has said that. You didn't know that? Ah, that is because you have never had anything to do with him."

A great many people slander others because of pride. They think that by depreciating others they will increase their own worth. They want to make the most of their own alleged good qualities. Everything they say and do will be good, and everything that others say and do will be wrong.

But the great bulk of malicious talk is done by people who are simply irresponsible, who have an itch to chatter about others without feeling any need to discover whether what they are saying is true or false. They just have to talk. Yet, although these latter are less guilty than the others—that is to say, than those who slander and backbite through hatred or envy or revenge—yet they are not free from sin. Whatever the motive that prompts them, they should not sully the reputation of their neighbour.

It is my belief that the sin of scandal-mongering includes all that is most evil and wicked. Yes, my dear brethren, this sin includes the poison of all the vices—the meanness of vanity, the venom of jealousy, the bitterness of anger, the malice of hatred, and the flightiness and irresponsibility so unworthy of a Christian.... Is it not, in fact, scandal-mongering which sows almost all discord and disunity, which breaks up friendships and hinders enemies from reconciling their quarrels, which disturbs the peace of homes, which turns brother against brother, husband against wife, daughter-in-law against mother-in-law and son-in-law against father-in-law? How many united households have

been turned upside down by one evil tongue, so that their members could not bear to see or to speak to one another? And one malicious tongue, belonging to a neighbour, man or woman, can be the cause of all this misery....

Yes, my dear brethren, the evil tongue of one scandalmonger poisons all the virtues and engenders all the vices. It is from that malicious tongue that a stain is spread so many times through a whole family, a stain which passes from fathers to children, from one generation to the next, and which perhaps is never effaced. The malicious tongue will follow the dead into the grave; it will disturb the remains of these unfortunates by making live again the faults which were buried with them in that resting place. What a foul crime, my dear brethren! Would you not be filled with fiery indignation if you were to see some vindictive wretch rounding upon a corpse and tearing it into a thousand pieces?

Such a sight would make you cry out in horror and compassion. And yet the crime of continuing to talk of the faults of the dead is much greater. A great many people habitually speak of someone who has died something after this fashion:

"Ah, he did very well in his time! He was a seasoned drinker.

He was as cute as a fox. He was no better than he should have been."

But perhaps, my friend, you are mistaken, and although everything may have been exactly as you have said, perhaps he is already in Heaven, perhaps God has pardoned him. But, in the meantime, where is your charity?

A PUBLIC PLAGUE

As you know my dear brethren, we are bound as fellow creatures to have human sympathy and feelings for one another. Yet one envious person would like, if he possibly could, to destroy everything good and profitable belonging to his neighbour. You know, too, that as Christians we must have boundless charity for our fellow men. But the envious person is far removed indeed from such virtues. He would be happy to see his fellow man ruin himself. Every mark of God's generosity towards his neighbour is like a knife thrust that pierces his heart and causes him to die in secret. Since we are all members of the same Body of which Jesus Christ is the Head, we should so strive that unity, charity, love, and zeal can be seen in one and all. To make us all happy, we should rejoice, as St. Paul tells, in the happiness of our fellow men and mourn with those who have cares or troubles. But, very far from experiencing such feelings, the envious are forever uttering scandals and calumnies against their neighbours. It appears to them that in this way they can do something to assuage and sweeten their vexation.

But, unfortunately, we have not said all that can be said about envy. This is the deadly vice which hurls kings and emperors from their thrones. Why do you think, my dear brethren, that among these kings, these emperors, these men who occupy the first places in the world of men, some are driven out of their places of privilege, some are poisoned, others are stabbed? It is simply because someone wants to rule in their place. It is not the food, nor the drink, nor the habitations that the authors of such crimes want. Not at all. They are consumed with envy.

Take another example. Here is a merchant who wants to have all the business for himself and to leave nothing at all for anyone else. If someone leaves his store to go elsewhere, he will do his best to say all the evil he can, either about the rival businessman himself or else about the quality of what he sells. He will take all possible means to ruin his rival's reputation, saying that the other's goods are not of the same quality as his own or that the other man gives short weight. You will notice, too, than an envious man like this has a diabolical trick to add to all this: "It would not do," he will tell you, "for you to say this to anyone else; it might do harm and that would upset me very much. I am only telling you because I would not like to see you being cheated."

A workman may discover that someone else is now going to work in a house where previously he was always employed. This angers him greatly, and he will do everything in his power to run down this "interloper" so that he will not be employed there after all.

Look at the father of a family and see how angry he becomes if his next-door neighbour prospers more than he or if the neighbour's land produces more. Look at a mother: she would like it if people spoke well of no children except hers. If anyone praises the children of some other family to her and does not say something good of hers, she will reply, "They are not perfect," and she will become quite upset. How foolish you are, poor mother! The praise given to others will take nothing from your children.

Just look at the jealousy of a husband in respect of his wife or of a wife in respect of her husband. Notice how they

inquire into everything the other does and says, how they observe everyone to whom the other speaks, every house into which the other enters. If one notices the other speaking to someone, there will be accusations of all sorts of wrongdoing, even though the whole episode may have been completely innocent.

This is surely a cursed sin which puts a barrier between brothers and sisters, too. The very moment that a father or a mother gives more to one member of the family than the others, you will see the birth of this jealous hatred against the parent or against the favoured brother or sister—a hatred which may last for years, and sometimes even for a lifetime. There are children who keep a watchful eye upon their parents just to insure that they will not give any sort of gift or privilege to one member of the family. If this should occur in spite of them, there is nothing bad enough that they will not say.

We can see that this sin makes its first appearance among children. You will notice the petty jealousies they will feel against one another if they observe any preferences on the part of the parents. A young man would like to be the only one considered to have intelligence, or learning, or a good character. A girl would like to be the only one who is loved, the only one well dressed, the only one sought after; if others are more popular than she, you will see her fretting and upsetting herself, even weeping, perhaps, instead of thanking God for being neglected by creatures so that she may be attached to Him alone. What a blind passion envy is, my dear brethren! Who could hope to understand it?

Unfortunately, this vice can be noted even among those in whom it should never be encountered—that is to say, among those who profess to practice their religion. They will take note of how many times such a person remains to go to Confession or of how So-and-So kneels or sits when she is saying her prayers.

They will talk of these things and criticise the people concerned, for they think that such prayers or good works are done only so that they may be seen, or in other words, that they are purely an affectation. You may tire yourself out telling them that their neighbour's actions concern him alone. They are irritated and offended if the conduct of others is thought to be superior to their own.

You will see this even among the poor. If some kindly person gives a little bit extra to one of them, they will make sure to speak ill of him to their benefactor in the hope of preventing him from benefiting on any further occasion.

Dear Lord, what a detestable vice this is! It attacks all that is good, spiritual as well as temporal.

We have already said that this vice indicates a mean and petty spirit. That is so true that no one will admit to feeling envy, or at least no one wants to believe that he has been attacked by it. People will employ a hundred and one devices to conceal their envy from others. If someone speaks well of another in our presence, we keep silence: we are upset and annoyed. If we must say something, we do so in the coldest and most unenthusiastic fashion. No, my dear children, there is not a particle of charity in the envious heart. St. Paul has told us that we must rejoice in the good which befalls our neighbour.

Joy, my dear brethren, is what Christian charity should inspire in us for one another. But the sentiments of the envious are vastly different.

I do not believe that there is a more ugly and dangerous sin than envy because it is hidden and is often covered by the attractive mantle of virtue or of friendship. Let us go further and compare it to a lion which we thought was muzzled, to a serpent covered by a handful of leaves which will bite us without our noticing it. Envy is a public plague which spares no one.

We are leading ourselves to Hell without realising it.

But how are we then to cure ourselves of this vice if we do not think we are guilty of it? I am quite certain that of the thousands of envious souls honestly examining their consciences, there would not be one ready to believe himself belonging to that company. It is the least recognised of sins.

Some people are so profoundly ignorant that they do not recognise a quarter of their ordinary sins. And since the sin of envy is more difficult to know, it is not surprising that so few confess it and correct it. Because they are not guilty of the big public sins committed by coarse and brutalised people, they think that the sins of envy are only little defects in charity, when, in fact, for the most part, these are serious and deadly sins which they are harbouring and tending in their hearts, often without fully recognising them.

"But," you may be thinking in your own minds, "if I really recognised them, I would do my best to correct them."

If you want to be able to recognise them, my dear brethren, you must ask the Holy Ghost for His light. He alone

will give you this grace. No one could, with impunity, point out these sins to you; you would not wish to agree nor to accept them; you would always find something which would convince you that you had made no mistake in thinking and acting in the way you did. Do you know yet what will help to make you know the state of your soul and to uncover this evil sin hidden in the secret recesses of your heart? It is humility. Just as pride will hide it from you, so will humility reveal it to you.
