

Sermon Cards

One Point About Prayer

By Rev. James M. Gillis, C.S.P.

Regular readers of Sermon Cards will bear witness that this column is seldom read as a pulpit from which to preach a sermon, or even as a forum for the discussion of any topic usually treated in church. Today's column will be an exception.

Since one may as well be hanged for a sleep as for a lamb, I shall also violate another precedent: I shall continue a subject that was started but left unfinished last week. I have indeed done that sort of thing before, but seldom and with apology. I dislike sermons myself; if my eye lights upon the "To Be Continued" I leave that story or that article alone.

But there are exceptions, and the fact is that the topic which claimed our attention last week cannot be dismissed in 600 words. So perhaps the patient reader can endure another 600.

Last week I retailed for the readers of this paper a fine specimen of controversial writing done by Father Ronald Knox in the London Tablet. Alloys Huxley, the novelist, who has been gravitating of late more and more toward philosophy and theology had written in "Grey Eminence" a surprising chapter on mystical prayer. Of course he had not pretended to speak from personal experience. He is not St. John of the Cross or St. Francis de Sales. He isn't even a Catholic and I doubt if he would call himself theologically a Christian. But he had read up on the subject of mystical contemplation. One of his authorities is an exhaustive masterpiece by the late Abbe Bremond "Histoire Litteraire du Mysticisme Religieux en France." Unfortunately, Mr. Huxley had gone through only five volumes, whereas his critic Father Knox had read all eleven. In the sixth volume, says Father Knox, Mr. Huxley would have found the correction of his error. How often that sort of thing happens! Strangers to Catholicism take a dip into a doctrine but they don't dip deep enough.

In Huxley's opinion, the mystics, while practicing a higher and purer kind of prayer than that of the usual intelligent and devout worshiper, are concerned only with the Godhead and not with the Second Person Incarnate. The thought of Jesus Crucified or even of Jesus Risen and in glory would

be to them a distraction. So Mr. Huxley thought, and with that in mind he ventured to say that the French School of Mysticism, Bernardine, Cassian, Origen and their followers "raised Catholic mysticism to its true position by an attempt to Christianize it." That phrase is Father Knox's, but it is accurate and fair to Mr. Huxley, who indeed goes on to say—in his own words—that Cardinal Berulle "in their country added Jesus-Christ and even Virgin-Mary, the contemplation of Christ and His Father in and for themselves . . . and by substituting Christ and the Virgin for the unchristianized Godhead of the earlier mystics" prevailed themselves and all who looked to them for instruction from attaining "to the higher stages of union" with God.

This—as I said last week—is deep stuff, but Father Knox's answer is not only understandable but useful to the ordinary Christian. And that's where we come in. He says "theological insistence on the doctrine of the Incarnation is essential, not with any desire to substitute the Incarnate Word for the Godhead as the object of adoration; but rather . . . to substitute the Incarnate Word for ourselves as the subject of devotion. He alone is the true Addresser; fallen man, left to himself, is altogether inadequate to the worship of a God so infinitely great as our God. Hence we have to clothe ourselves with Christ, with the dispositions of Christ in the various states of His Incarnation. If we are to approach the business of worshipping God in the right way, we have to identify ourselves mentally, with Christ in the manner, or Christ in Gestaltmann, set in that framework, we can try to contemplate."

Father Knox says that this practice is not easy. It is however precisely what we do in almost all liturgical prayer, especially in those of the Mass which end with the familiar phrase "per Dominum nostrum Jesum Christum." We pray God "through Jesus Christ our Lord." We get back, our Lord (so to speak) and approach the Father "in Him and by Him and through Him" as we also say in the Mass. If we would outside of Christ all that we have with which to approach the Godhead of our self, that is to say, nothing. If we place ourselves inside Christ, all that we think and say has infinite value. Difficult? Not too difficult. We need not be a Saint or a mystic to do that. Any one can do it.

I have thought it advisable to write two articles on this subject because in these days of "global war" we are anxious to pray for all men all over the world and to do it in a universal way. The best way is to address our prayers to God not as our own but through Jesus Christ the Son of God Who in Himself comprises all men and is Himself God. (Copyright, 1942, N. C. W. C.)

Library Signpost

'Father Gillis Pulls A Boner'

By Rev. Benedict Ehmman

In his column last week, Father Gillis took Aldous Huxley to task for turning theologian of his recent biography, Grey Eminence. True, Mr. Huxley does run afoul several times on theological matters, some of them of essential importance, and what he expresses as his notion of God in "previous book, Ends and Means, though it does not appear in Grey Eminence, yet it renders suspect the author's interpretation, even though the direct meaning of his words in the latter book is orthodox on the matter of God's Nature and Being. Father Gillis might, however, have credited Huxley with being no fool, since he is one of England's best writers, and certainly one of its most thoughtful. All the big Catholic reviews have credited Grey Eminence as being one of the few important books of the year. Both The Downside Review and Blackfriars gave it article-length reviews, one by Dom Christopher Butler, the other by Father Gerald Vann, both of whom are critics of the first rank. The fact that these men took seriously the task of rectifying the aberrations of the book is a sign that they took Mr. Huxley far more seriously than does Father Gillis. Nowhere in their reviews do they suggest that they are dealing with a rank intruder. In fact, after they have taken issue with Huxley's errors and tangents, they conclude their case far more kindly and (I think) justly than Father Gillis.

Says Dom Christopher Butler: "It is a matter for thankfulness that, in the midst of the international storms at present raging, a writer of Mr. Huxley's special qualities and background should have pointed us back to the guiding star of contemplation. It is not too much to hope that, in the path of the mystics, he will acquire their love for the Church whose special ornament they are and their conviction that the contemplative, as much as any other, is bound to obey her voice."

And Father Gerald Vann: "As biography Grey Eminence is a fine and vivid piece of work, as a study of a complex psychological tangle it is absorbing, more important, it is a brilliant and forcible statement of the only solution to the main problem which now confronts our world a solution in default of which we can have nothing to look forward to but disintegration and death. To quarrel with elements, however important in Mr. Huxley's argument without stressing one's adherence to its main contention would be an unpardonable falsification. There is no telling how great a good the book may do. Its moral is hard, but the worst tactic to pursue with hard facts is to refuse to look them in the face."

The serious reader getting his first impression of Grey Eminence from Father Gillis' editorial, would be given a false prejudice against it; far from "stressing his adherence to its main contention," Father Gillis does not even mention what this main contention is. Is he not therefore liable to the charge of "unpardonable falsification"? Surely not deliberately but I think on account of his apodictic turn of mind.

"What is this main contention of Grey Eminence?" I can imagine the curious reader asking at this point. Out of many passages throughout the book, I choose the following as stating it briefly: " . . . where there is no vision, the people perish, and if those who are the salt of the earth lose their savour, there is nothing to keep that earth disinfected nothing to prevent it from falling into complete decay. The mystics are channels

through which a little knowledge of reality filters down into our human universe of ignorance and illusion. A totally unmythical world would be a world totally blind and insane." (p. 103)

"It is a matter of experience and observation that action undertaken by ordinary unregenerate people, such as their school and without spiritual insight, seldom do much good." (p. 201)

"In all that concerns the saving of souls and the improving of the quality of people's thoughts and feelings and behaviour, a man of orison (prayer) will accomplish more in one year than another man in all his life." (p. 302)

I said above that Father Gillis not only does not stress Mr. Huxley's main contention (which Father Vann says should in fairness be done), but he does not even mention it. Obviously, however, he even minimizes its significance in the course of his remarks on mysticism. It was here that I saw "ref." The matter is so important to let him get away with it. I think it can be simply denied that mysticism is "a subject that not one theologian in a hundred would tackle." I agree with Father Gillis that "you never hear a sermon from a Catholic pulpit on mysticism and contemplative prayer," and that "you seldom hear one even in a monastery or a convent." But when he assigns the reasons, I take exception. "Too difficult," he says. I distinguish: That the subject is too difficult in itself, I deny; that it is too difficult for the preparation which our priests have been given for it, I agree. "Too dangerous," he says. Then the whole business of the guidance of souls is dangerous. For what else is the guidance of souls but a firm and gentle direction of them toward the perfection of charity, with the help of faith and hope? And what else is mysticism but the perfection of union with the Divine Charity itself?

For whatever my voice is worth, I protest against the tendency to regard mysticism as an exotic by-product of the spiritual life. The best theologians agree that ecstasies and visions and the like are not essential to mystical union with God, and that when they occur, they are abnormal and secondary. Hundreds of mystics live a perfect contemplative life without them. To say that they are the essence of mysticism is a lie. The life of grace is not static. Either it retrogresses or progresses. If it progresses, there comes a time when God's providence leads a soul to higher degrees of faith, hope and charity, and the action of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit becomes more pervasive. It is then that the soul enters upon a keener purgation and a more intimate union. Ascetical theology (which deals with its cleaving unto God) are but higher pinnacles of that science of the soul which begins in the valley of moral theology and is occupied only with the boundaries of sin and grace. Dangerous? Surely! All climbing is dangerous. But there is not one Christian who can say that God does not call him to "walk forty days and forty nights in the strength of that food even to the mount of God." (Acknowledgments to Harper & Bros. for the Huxley quotations.)

FIVE and TEN Years Ago--

—In the files of the CATHOLIC COURIER From August 24, 1932 Edition Use of Gregorian Chant, and the missions as an aid in the classroom were two new features incorporated into the program for the 24th Annual Conference of the Diocesan School Association planned at Aquinas Institute. From August 26, 1927 Edition "We need a laity which, because it understands the place of Catholic education in Catholic life and in the life of this nation, will support Catholic education to the end," declared the Rev. John M. Duffy, Catholic Schools superintendent in announcing the opening of schools.

BE DIFFERENT

(The following is a most timely editorial appearing in the August 23, 1942 issue of "Our Voice Bulletin," Catholic bi-monthly publication edited and printed by and for the inmates of the Shrine Reformatory.)

Well, pain, the world's in a mad race, isn't it? No talking which is come of it, either. War in the East! War in the West! Fascist Treachery! Propaganda. Men killing each other like beasts! Days, like an everlasting!

We've tried to run the world without God. We thought we were on the side of the angels. But the cruelly devil often appeared as an angel of light. He pointed out to us all the kingdoms of the world, offered them to us for a song. Like dumb idiots we took him at his word. Now most of us are too ashamed to admit our mistake. Too conceited to tell others we've abused the good things God has given us. We were slaves of pleasure and the comfortable things gold could buy. But the gold has made our hearts soft and yellow. We thought more about being good criminals, than about being good Catholics for Christ's own heart. If we don't get the breaks, like some of our friends did, our eyes turn green with envy. We've looked for happiness in creatures, not in our Creator, they told us not to do that. Seek first the kingdom of heaven? Not us. Why right now we're more fussy about our bread and butter than about the job of saving our souls.

Take care of God and God will take care of you. Some never realize this till almost too late. For us to do what was right was often a pretty tough job. So we left our task half-done. But if anything's worth doing at all, it's worth doing well. That's why I hope we shall keep trying to keep on the straight and narrow path. Our Lord wants us to. He wants us to be perfect, to love God with all our hearts, souls and minds. Love of God? That's what makes this world go around and around. Let us not close our eyes to that war across the waters. But let us not become involved here in this country in class hatreds, race distinctions that they have boiled up in their greed of potage. Just learn the simple lesson of love while we're still young. Then we're sure we'll be okay.

Oh, we know we've taken the wrong road. So we're trying to back-up and find again the royal road of the cross. But we'll need our humble prayers, our faith in God, if we ever expect to travel it again. No matter how rough the backward stretch becomes, don't get off the road. Let us not repeat the errors that we have made before.

We are sorry for some of you who couldn't resist the urge to follow others instead of the Master.

Take our word for it though, it's no fun, much easier to follow God, provided you begin before it is too late.

Ignore the crack-pots who push their religion as an old-fashioned rule. We can't throw away our Catholicism as we would an old pair of shoes, or have it either, as we would a new suit for Sunday only. Too many of us have tossed our faith by the wayside as useless baggage. Simply because we have found its commandments too difficult.

Why don't we attempt the heroic deeds which the Bible have attempted before? Why not "Dare To Be Different," as they were as they lived so may we. No one is born a saint. He becomes one. Sometimes this "becoming" is a whole life's work; yet it's the only work ultimately worth our while.

We have our whole life ahead of us friends. "Dare To Be Different." Let us beg God daily on our knees in our Masses and Communion, to make us great saints. But we've got to be daring to make the grade. In this way only will the world be saved. For we, the young people of today, are going to be the group-up of tomorrow.

The greatest battle ever fought, imaginable, is our own against the world in our conquest of heaven. No matter who we are, from some part of the country or world we come from. No matter whether we become successful in business, or professional men, Christ's way is the only one that leads to heaven, to the place of wonderful fulfillment, where every week of life means an increase of Christian saintliness. So long as we travel this narrow road, we will be happy, free to sing the song of the saints in our hearts, free to look joyfully without fear in that day or night, the last in our lives, when we reach the end of the road. Waiting for us there will be our glorified Saviour Himself. With a smile on His lips, He'll say: "Come ye blessed of my Father, because you the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world."

We've just got to be different people! And stop taking the mediocre stuff they've been dishing out for us. The congressman's wife sat up in bed, a startled look on her face. "Jim," she whispered, "there's a robber in the house." "Impossible," was her husband's sleepy reply. "In the middle of the night in the house, never."

STRANGE BUT TRUE Little-Known Facts for Catholics

By M. J. MURRAY

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Advertisement for a book titled 'STEPHEN VIII (924-931)'. The ad features a portrait of a man and text describing the book's content: 'FIRST POPE TO SHAKE OFF HIS BEARD', 'He ordered the Italian clergy to do likewise? (12th Century Clerical Documents)', 'The Half-Shell', 'BIBLIO IS KNOWN ONLY TO WAYFARERS IN HEAVEN OF THIS ALLEGORY ON THE WALKS OF ST. BARTHOLOMEW MONASTERY', 'THE CHARIOT FROM A Pagan Temple HAS FOR LONG BEEN USED AS AN EPISCOPAL CHAIR IN ST. MARK'S Now in the Vatican Museum'. The publisher is listed as W. N. Sons, Chicago.