

III

RELIGION, THE SOLE SOLUTION¹

He that loveth not abideth in death.

In this we have known the charity of God, because he has laid down his life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. Let us not love in word, nor in tongue, but in deed and in truth.—I JOHN, III.

STANDING here within these cloistered walls where “the very stones in beauty speak,” there comes to me with the message of the epistle of this Sunday, the second after Pentecost, the warning cries of the man who visualized these architectural forms, and who in booklets of large content presents his philosophic views, who takes his position in the line by the qualitative standard of education, and shows us how and where the great creative works of philosophy, religion, and art have been called into being. He traces for us the upward curve of human progress, and I believe that Ralph Adams Cram’s “Sins of the Fathers” and “Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh” stand out as prominently in their vision and spiritual beauty to-day as this, his exquisite creation of brick and mortar, amid the multitude of merely ordinary buildings which mark the city of Houston.

William Marsh Rice, who drew this beautiful structure so far as its content is concerned, living upon the prairies of Texas, had no university education, but he did have love for his fellow-men surging in his heart. He had the philosophy of John.

¹ Baccalaureate sermon of the fifth annual commencement of the Rice Institute, preached by the Rev. Father James M. Kirwin, V.G., of Galveston, Texas, in the academic court, at nine o'clock Sunday morning, June 6, 1920.

George Hermann—and I have seen him frequently with the mud of the prairies upon his boots—had no university education, but he dreamed of bringing healing on the wings of even to this community, and he threw green trees and God's sunshine out here next to this wonderful institution.

Education does not make dreamers. Character makes dreamers and makes dreams come true. Others may give them form, but it is the content that counts, and it counts because "he that loves not abideth in death." They will live on in successive generations, and the young, like you, will draw from the beauty of the one's educational vision and the beauty of the other's charitable and uplifting vision, delight and pleasure, and, let us all hope, the desire of imitation. I do not believe that anybody could come into these precincts who did not get something of inspiration and the desire to imitate.

This message of the beloved disciple sounds strange in the ears of those who are caught up with the passing philosophy of the day—the philosophy of the fool who said in his heart, "There is no God. Eat, drink, and be merry, for to-morrow ye die." I believe that the future historian will label this period, cynical and selfish, as "No-Man's Time," when egoism manifested itself superbly, when man became indifferent to what happened to others, when only self mattered. And how sudden the transition came. The gospel of solidarity was preached by the Great War, the individual was sacrificed in the common cause, and this concept of John, "We ought to lay down our lives for the brethren," fired the imagination and nerved the soul of millions, and some of us dreamed that the simple truth that mankind is one and indivisible had penetrated into the universal conscience. Versailles was a rude awakening. The voice that thrilled the world was

silenced, and practical men who smiled at altruism and idealism took the wheel and are steering the world-ship. We whipped the German army in the field; we did not destroy the materialistic philosophy that ruled Germany. When death and destruction were everywhere, the superstition of the excellence of purely materialistic philosophy was revealed and discredited, and its most zealous adherents became its most angry accusers; and yet to-day Carlyle's image of a basket of serpents, each struggling to get its head above the rest, is cited as an "expressively precise picture of humanity."

The other day, in Paris, when one of the striking artisans was censured because he failed to remember the duty of sacrifice for his comrades, he replied, "You have silenced the voice that came from heaven, and since we may no longer speak in the name of Christian charity, in what name are we to speak henceforth?" And Gustave Hervé, turning his back on anti-National Socialism, cries out, "Was not the ancient Church a necessary safeguard to prevent human folly from dashing itself against the very foundations of all civilization?" The problem which obtrudes is mainly a great spiritual problem, and the Church alone holds the solution. She preaches the truths which are eternally young in opposition to those which are merely modern. To the worship of Efficiency she opposes the Culture of the soul. She cries out to-day that pride, covetousness, lust, anger, envy, gluttony, and sloth are social evils because they are sins, and they are the ugly offspring of mistaken individualism against which St. John inveighs. Speaking in the name of the historic Church of Christ, I have no new commandment to give unto you. Like John I cry out, "The old commandment is the word which ye have heard from the beginning. For all that is in

the world, the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, passeth away, but he that doeth the will of God abideth forever." Fitzgerald caught that ominous thought from the lines of the old Persian, Omar, and phrased it:

The Worldly Hope men set their Hearts upon
Turns Ashes—or it prospers; and anon,
Like Snow upon the Desert's dusty Face
Lighting a little Hour or two—is gone.

You young men and young women are going forth into a world that is troubled and sore-distressed. Knowing something of the character of the men who teach at the Rice Institute, and the love of letters and art and science that actuates them, I know that whilst they have spent themselves to endow your intellects, they have through the teaching of discipline and self-control given you a knowledge of self, have tried to promote morality and refinement and lead you to see that the only permanent content is to be obtained, not in the valleys of sense, but by continual striving toward the high peaks of reason.

You are to be leaders in the world's work; and the work needs men of highly developed intellect, fine sensibility, wide and penetrating vision, a passion for clean living, a consciousness of the eternal force of charity, honor, and the love of God.

The greatest question that confronts the American people to-day is whether we shall go forward by preserving the American principles and traditions that have served us so well, or whether we shall abandon these principles and traditions and substitute for them a state built, not upon the civil liberty of the individual, but upon the plenary power of organized government. Speaking in the name of the historic Church that has spanned the centuries and

witnessed the testing of a thousand idealistic and socialistic schemes and fancies, I cannot but voice a warning against Radical Socialism. I grant you that there is much confusion and much loose thinking and false terminology, but any system of government that strikes at the family, the source and spring of the race, at property rights, an inalienable privilege of thrift, and at industry, the only incentive to individual toil, is treading the ways that lead to anarchy and chaos. But if by Socialism is meant that the individual must not live for himself alone, but must use his powers, his capacities, and his gains for the benefit of his fellows, then every Christian is a Socialist, for these principles are fundamental to Christian teaching, and are set out in the epistle of this morning. All of us who are in our right minds are anxious to improve social conditions, to better the public health, to diminish the hours of the laborer who really works, to increase the rewards and add to the contentment of those who do hard manual labor, to increase and make secure provision against illness, lack of employment, and indigent old age, to improve the housing conditions of our large cities, and to see that the essentials of physical life—water, food, light, and transportation—are furnished of the best quality and at the lowest practicable cost. If this be Socialism or social reform, I bid you turn back to the thirteenth century and find it in mediæval Europe, where guilds operated and great universities flourished, and those wonderful Gothic cathedrals built by community centers nestled above their cities and lifted the vision of the worker to the skies.

Analyzing our present social reform movements, I find only one incentive lacking. They have stilled the voice that spoke from heaven, and why should the world heed their warning cry? What we need vitally is a sense of

duty, inculcated in every individual and based upon our responsibility to the God who created us, and who thundered from Sinai, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." We have all been insistent upon our individual rights, and we have been remiss in our duties. The great moral task of humanity is to make the sense of duty as alert as is the sense of justice, to place behind the former a noble vehemence that will hold men true to the spiritual ideals in which alone they can find peace. Moral and social confusion everywhere prevails. If in the past Property had been conscious of its obligations and generous in interpreting them, we should not know the present social cleavage that has reached to the foundations of life. If Industrial Power, after gaining lordship over millions of lives, had been as keen in understanding its social duties, the laboring class would not have been led into the conditions that we know. If the laboring class itself, despite wrongs and long delayed justice, had maintained a balanced sense of duty and had held true to larger ideals, it would have been spared many sad pages in its history. If government, organized primarily for distributive justice, had given earlier definition and far more effective sanction to the general welfare and the rights of the weaker classes, we should have been adequately protected against the futile idealism that threatens to-day. The appeal that radical movements now make to the thousands whom they mislead is effective because of the traditions that the organized laboring classes carry in their memory.

Men cry out that Christianity has failed, that the Church is helpless because men do not accept, and many professed Christians do not apply, the gospel precepts. Christianity has not failed. Its Founder came in the poverty and want of the cattle stable. He died bruised and broken upon the

cross of shame; His few followers, Galilean fishermen of a race contemned and despised, assembled in an upper chamber in Jerusalem, and went forth to conquer the world. They triumphed, and the cross of shame was emblazoned upon the banners of Constantine because they applied the Christian principles to their daily lives. "See, how these Christians love one another," was the cry of admiration upon pagan lips. The Church of God has not changed. Her message is always the same: "Let us not love in word, nor in tongue, but in deed and in truth." She is always the same in her character, her mission, her doctrine, for these are all of God. She has waited in the wilderness and crouched in the catacombs. She met the barbarian and curbed his rage. She organized a new civilization upon the wide ruins of the old. She cleared the forest and drained the marshes and builded the towns. She covered Europe with colleges and cathedrals. She was the mother of learning and the patroness of art, but all the while her great message was that of John, "We ought to lay down our lives for the brethren." In weakness and voluntary poverty she went her ceaseless rounds of mercy; she entered the hovel, the dungeon, the slave-mart. She ventured forth patient and alone into the desert; through swamp and jungle, through fire and martyrdom, she won the world to the gospel of Christ. Her race is not run. This sublime conviction, this divine truth of the equal brotherhood of men through their common brotherhood with Christ, is the supremest democratic idea that has ever illumined the mind of man, and its practical application to human conduct has been the most powerful democratizing influence ever introduced into the social relationships of the human race. Christian charity is not dead. It still bends millions of the strong to serve the weak, it keeps the mother

by the cradle, it puts the Sister of Charity by the cot of pestilence, it chastens wealth by the service of the poor, it refines and uplifts ignorance by the touch of culture, it dries the tears "wet on heaven's grey cheek." The Church accepts the challenge of to-day as she has met every problem of the centuries past. She teaches men to find their happiness in the intangible compensations of life. The instincts of men must be controlled. She must convince the world of the social as well as the spiritual value of renunciation and sacrifice. She must continue to teach that the pathway to peace leads away from selfishness toward the ways of service, sympathy, understanding, and love.

The Christian Church must continue to teach, though men heed it not. "Go ye therefore and teach all nations," is her divine commission. She can afford to be patient. After all, the Prussian perversion of history was only a selfish adaptation to its national ambitions, to the narrow materialistic teachings which flowered in consummate pursuit of power rather than in "passion for perfection" in the development of character. They ignored or ridiculed Christian belief in the unity of human origin and destiny, the brotherhood of mankind in our Redeemer, the glorious civilizing function of God in human affairs. Materialism is an intellectual error, a social plague, an economic menace, and a political abyss. It has never been overcome except by true religion.

Substitutes for genuine Christian faith are offered, all of them prescinding from any external religious authority, denying positive revelation, and smiling contemptuously at the known and feasible will of God. Most of them are vague emotionalism evolved either from the helpless, wordy pantheism of static India or the dead stoicism of ancient Rome.

The sources of our human ills are chiefly within us, in our darksome intellect and enfeebled will. And it is only the religion of the cross, of divine redemption, of divine healing and illumination that can lift up fallen and helpless man, as the good Samaritan lifted up the wronged and heathen brother by the roadside and restored him gratuitously to health and a social place.

Human selfishness is the fruitful source of all the evil, all the misery, all the injustice that is written on history's page, and that enfolds itself in to-day's tragedy. There is only one power that can cope with the love of self, and that power is religion or the love of God. The ancient Roman Empire, our great counterpart, was saved from blighting materialism by the knowledge of God, by the love and fear of Him, the obedience and service of Him, and the faith and hope and love laid up in His gospel. Our pride may revolt at this simple message of John, as did the pride of those Athenian philosophers who listened to St. Paul on the Hill of Mars, but human pride has often gone the road of humiliation. In Rome's golden days Peter and Paul converted no philosophers, no jurists, no rhetoricians of Rome, but in the days of its decay and near ruin, Augustine and Victorinus came joyfully into the Church of God as into a sure refuge against the gathering storm and the falling night.

Whatever change time has wrought in opinions and in social conditions, whatever the progress that has been made in scientific knowledge, whatever new machinery, whatever hitherto unutilized forces have been placed at the disposition of man, it is still and must forever be true that nothing but Christian love can give us the power rightly to cheer, console, strengthen, guide, uplift, illumine, and purify one another. "He that loveth not abideth in death."

May I concrete these rambling thoughts and present them to you, young men and women standing at the open gates of a wider and fairer future? Human worth is moral worth. Man's proper measure is character, conduct is three fourths of life; right-doing brings the deepest and most lasting content and gladness to the heart of man. Goodness of life tends to length of days, to health, to success. It is not possible to respect one's self and to make no sacrifice for one's fellow-men. What we need above all things is the man, the influence, the institution with power to nourish the life of the soul, to give us faith, hope, and love.

What we sow we reap, whether there be a question of individuals or of nations. We do not need more of new laws; what we need is a new spirit, a more real faith in God, a more real love of our fellow-man, more honesty, more charity, more chastity, more unselfishness. Morality, and not legality, is the only foundation upon which a free government can securely rest.

Young men and young women, carry out with you from the halls of this institution the mighty work in science, in letters, and in the arts upon which these men have expended themselves, but also carry with it the message that you have seen in their daily lives, that it is not down in the valleys of sense but high up in the spiritual peaks that man really lives.

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