

BISHOP O'LEARY'S LENTEN PASTORAL

The following is His Lordship Bishop O'Leary's Lenten Pastoral Letter read in all the Catholic Churches of the diocese last Sunday.

In Our Lenten Pastoral of last year, we called your attention to many evils that follow from injury done to your neighbor by the various unjust practices so prevalent in our midst. This year we desire to remark for you and for your correction, if needed, the evils that accrue from neglect or forgetfulness of the second commandment of God. "Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain."

By this commandment we are not only forbidden to show irreverence to God's name but are also commanded to show it the mere word alone, but also the majesty appertaining to the Most High.

True reverence consists of fear and love and when we consider the infinite perfections of God; the wisdom that prevails, guides and knows in the very smallest details the many millions of beings on earth, as well as the millions of celestial spirits; the boundless power, that has by a word created the countless orbs in space and maintains them in the greatest harmony of action and of movement; the wondrous Majesty—"Who glorifies in holiness, terrible and praiseworthy, doing wonders?" (Exod. XV. 11) we are impelled to a deep and reverential fear of a God so great, so infinitely majestic and so glorious.

When we think also of His infinite goodness and love, of the personal care He exercises over us in every detail of our life, of the love, pure to a God only, that brought Him down to earth and to an ignominious death upon the Cross that we might be saved, of the countless and undeserved graces and benefits that He has showered upon us, our souls are filled with sincere and reverential love for Him Who "first hath loved us." (1. John IV. 19).

We manifest our reverence, — our fear and our love — by invoking God's Holy Name with true and heartfelt devotion, and He demands this of us in the Commandment of which we treat. Newton, the great astronomer, had the deepest respect for the name of God; he uncovered his head and bowed low whenever it was uttered in his presence. Cardinal Wiseman writes, "To each of us it ought to be dear, by each of us it ought to be cherished and lovingly pronounced. Speak it in trouble and it shall bring you comfort; speak it in temptation and it shall bring you victory; speak it in time of relaxing fervor and it shall throw fire into your hearts; speak it in devotion and it shall perfect you. There is no time, no place where it is out of season, if to the lips at least to the thought; there is no action so blessed which it will not improve; there is no forgetfulness so deep from which it will not arouse you."

By the name of Jesus the apostles and saints worked miracles; St. Peter said to the lame man at the gate of the Temple: "In the name of Jesus Christ arise and walk" (Acts III. 6). Christ promised that in His name devils should be cast out (Mark XVI. 17). "There is no other name under heaven given to man, whereby we must be saved says Holy Writ" (Acts IV. 12), and St. Paul adds, "At the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those that are in heaven, on earth or under the earth." (Phil. II. 10). So should we with the Psalmist cry: Bless the Lord oh my soul, and let all that is within thee bless His Holy Name." (Ps. CII. 1).

The reverence due to God's name should also be extended to all persons or things that pertain to divine worship. Our Lord bids us reverence His priests, "He that despiseth you despiseth Me." (Luke X. 16) and in the Old Testament we read the command of God: "Touch not my anointed" (1. Par. XVI. 22) and He demands reverence for holy things and places. To Moses on appearing to Him in the burning bush, He said, "Come not nigh hither; put off the shoes from thy feet; for the place whereon Thou standest is holy ground." (Exodus. III. 5), and the Jews were forbidden to touch the Ark of the Covenant. (Numb. IV. 15) and commanded to have reverence for the sanctuary of the Lord. "Reverence My sanctuary" (Lev. XXXI. 2). So also in the New Dispensation the things that belong to God and to God's holy worship are to be treated and spoken of with reverence and respect because of Him to Whom they now pertain.

By the second commandment it is not forbidden to take lawful oaths and vows. By an oath we mean the taking of the name of God or of something directly pertaining to God or His holy worship to witness the truth of what we assert. By a vow we mean the promise to do something confirmed by calling God as witness to our promise or intention. "Thou shalt swear by His name." (Deut. VI. 13). As vice overspread the earth and lying developed as a means of corruption and injustice it became necessary to have some confirmation for the assertions or promises of men to one another so that they would be believed and relied upon. In many cases the proving of the truth became necessary for the good of religion and of society and hence men, under God's sanction, began to call upon Him who is truth itself to be the witness of their truthfulness or as the bond by which they bind themselves in a promise. Thus St. Paul calls upon God to witness the truth of what he writes: "Behold! before God I lie not." (Gal. I. 20), and David promises with an oath that Solomon should be heir to his Kingdom, "Even as I swore to Thee by the Lord the God of Israel, saying: Solomon Thy son shall reign after me." (III. Kings I. 30).

Certain conditions, however, have been attached to the lawfulness of taking an oath by the name of the Lord, for we read in Holy Scripture, "Thou shalt swear in truth and in judgment and in justice." (Jer. IX. 2). Therefore shall we swear in truth: that is calling God to witness only what we know or really believe to be true or really intend to do; in judgment: that is with reflection, discretion and for a good cause, and in justice: that is, the thing sworn to and our intention must be honest. We can, therefore, lawfully take an oath when it is for the truth, when God's honor requires it, as in matters of religion and worship, when it is necessary for our own good, as when our life or reputation be at stake, or when our neighbor's good requires it, as when knowing the innocence of an accused person we swear to it, as when the King swears to observe the constitution, the judge to administer impartial justice, the witness to speak the truth.

Accompanied and safeguarded by the foregoing conditions an oath is lawful and becomes a solemn religious act as is shown from different passages of Scripture, "Thou shalt fear the Lord, thy God," says Moses, "and shall serve Him only, and thou shalt swear by His name." (Deut. VI. 13). St. John in the Apocalypse assures us that the angels sometimes make use of this solemn form to attest the truth: "And the Angel whom I saw standing upon the sea and upon the earth lifted up his hand to heaven and he swore by Him that liveth forever and ever." (Ap. X. 5-6). In his epistle to the Hebrews, St. Paul says: "That God Himself making promise to Abraham because He had no one greater by whom He might swear, swore by Himself." (Heb. VI. 13), and the Psalmist declares: "The Lord hath sworn, and He will not repent; thou are a priest forever according to the order of Melchisedech." (Ps. CIX. 4).

We may thus conclude, dearly beloved, that God does not condemn the taking of lawful oaths and vows but on the contrary approves of them when they are taken in the proper dispositions and under the necessary conditions of reverence, that is, that they be taken in truth, judgment and justice. The danger, however, of abuse creeping in, and the gravity of such abuse is noted even by God Himself for in giving the Ten Commandments to man the Second Commandment is the only one to which He has attached the threat of punishment. In all the other Commandments we are commanded to do certain things or forbidden to do others but the command or prohibition is not accompanied by a threat of punishment for disobedience; but after the Second Commandment and after that one only, we find a dire threat of punishment added, "The Lord will not hold him

guiltless that shall take the name of the Lord his God in vain." (Exod. XX. 7).

TAKING GOD'S NAME IN VAIN

Many persons have contracted the habit of thoughtlessly exclaiming at every trifle that surprises them "Good Lord", "My God" or some such similar expression, or they interlard their conversation with the name of the Lord in one form or another without any reason whatever. This is a very bad habit and easily leads to graver sins against the Commandments of God, especially when surprise or enthusiasm becomes changed to anger or grave disappointment. Such a habit shows an habitual want of reverence for the name of God and those who truly love God are never unmoved when they hear His Holy Name thus profaned, and such careless, flippant use of God or any other sacred name is at least a venial sin. "Let not the naming of God be usual in thy mouth for thou shalt not escape free from sin." (Ecclus. XXIII. 10). The Jews did not venture to pronounce the name of God, but changed the vowels in it to make another word which they made use of; such was their reverence for the name which God had given them.

How much more shocking and even scandalous is the use of the name of our most Divine Saviour, and how much more grave is the sin! In the first place the reverence which is taught to all for the Holy Name of Jesus is so great that rarely can it be used flippantly or carelessly unless there be real motives of irreverence behind its use, and in the second place such usage so offends the ears and souls of the hearers that a much graver scandal is thereby given. Still more shocking and graver the evil on the part of godless parents and teachers when from the mouths of little children, whom Christ likened unto the Angels, pours forth irreverent and profane speech and even the most Holy Name of Jesus as if from the mouths of the demons in Hell.

A habit that may not be so grave in an adult must certainly take on a very special gravity, that of scandalizing youth, when it is a source of the acquisition of irreverent and profane speech by the young, in whose presence it is thoughtlessly or maliciously made use of. Hence in judging of the guilt of such habits of irreverence and profanation the amount of irreverence and of scandal must be taken into account.

SWEARING

We have seen that God permits and approves of swearing under certain conditions, but where these conditions are absent it is sinful to swear or to take an oath.

It is forbidden to take a false oath, that is to swear to what we know to be untrue, as when St. Peter denied with an oath that he knew the Saviour.

This is the sin known as perjury and is perhaps far too common today, especially in our courts of law.

Often to avoid inconvenience, to aid a friend or for some other reason, witnesses brazenly swear to what they know to be false and frequently salve their consciences with the thought that it was doing good to someone and no harm to anyone. They forget that it did harm to the Infinite Majesty of God, whom they called upon to be the witness of the lie they tell. The God of truth is defiled and insulted by being called upon to be the witness and to sanction what is false and mendacious. Even when the lie itself is trifling, calling God to be a witness to it is a grave injury to the Almighty and hence a mortal sin.

Some there are who vainly and ignorantly excuse themselves by saying that they did not repeat the words of the oath, they did not kiss or touch the Bible when called upon to take the oath and therefore they were not bound by it. They are only deluding themselves because by the fact that they enter into a witness-box, or take the place assigned in court to a witness, go through the ceremony of an oath even incompletely and carelessly they nevertheless by the above actions publicly proclaim themselves in the court as sworn witnesses and are bound by the oath even if it was improperly administered or incompletely taken through thoughtlessness or with malice aforethought. Prevarications therefore do not excuse in conscience and telling an untruth under such circumstances is ever and always committing perjury and is also a grave sin. It may be well to note here also that should perjury be the cause of damage to one's neighbor, by causing him to lose his case or his reputation or injuring him in any other way, the perjurer is bound in conscience to make good the damage thus unjustly inflicted.

Many texts of Scripture show us how detestable in the sight of God is the sin of perjury, thus in the Prophecy of Zacharius we read "Love not a false oath — which I hate," saith the Lord; and in the second Book of Kings it is narrated that God sent a famine under David because Saul had broken his oath not to slay the Gabaonites, and the seven of his children were given to crucifixion.

The civil law formerly punished the perjurer with death but now, even in our lax day, a convicted perjurer in our courts of law is punished by a severe term of imprisonment.

Taking of false oaths therefore is detestable in the eyes of God and man, has been punished by God in this life with the severest punishment even in the succeeding generation and will be punished by Him more severely, in the life to come. The taking of oaths even when true should not be done too frequently and for trivial reasons. We should have recourse to them only for just and grave reasons. An erroneous opinion existed among the Jews that truth alone was the only condition required for an oath and hence they did not hesitate to make use of them on the most trivial occasions and to exact them in a similar manner from others. Our Divine Master reproves and condemns this practice and teaches us that an oath is never to be taken unless very grave interests necessitate so solemn a pledge. "You have heard that it was said of them of old, Thou shalt forswear thyself but thou shalt perform thy oaths to the Lord. But I say to you not to swear at all, neither by heaven, for it is the throne of God, nor by the earth, for it is His footstool . . . but let your speech be yea, yea, no, no, and that which is above these is of evil." (Matth. V. 33-37). Forgetful of this Divine teaching the conversation of many to-day is loaded with oaths and they confirm the most frivolous assertions, with oaths "By God," "By Jesus," and so forth, making what would otherwise be at least a harmless conversation amusing or entertaining an offense to the Almighty, deserving of His detestation and anger. "Let not thy mouth be accustomed to swearing," says the Book of Ecclesiasticus, "for in it there are many falls, and let not the naming of God be usual in the mouth, and meddle not with the names of the saints, for thou shalt not escape free from them. A man that sweareth much shall be filled with iniquity and a scourge shall not depart from his house." (Ecclus. XXVIII. 9-12).

CURSING

By cursing we mean the use of the holy names as an imprecation or sort of prayer calling down evil upon persons or things. It differs from swearing since in swearing no evil is wished or prayed for, while in cursing we pray for evil upon ourselves or upon God's creatures as when parents who when angry wish ill to their children, using the name of God or heaven, or workmen who call down evil on the tools they employ. Cursing, therefore, is of a diabolical nature, that is, the one who curses speaks the language of the devil since his utterances are directly opposed to the love of one's neighbor which God requires of us. By wishing evil to one's neighbor a person expresses hatred for that person and no one hates as does the devil. Asking God to condemn to eternal perdition a soul for whose salvation He shed His most Precious Blood is to oppose the very object of His incarnation and redemption, and thus again to partake of the devil's desires and sentiments and to speak his language. Bishop Hay gives the following explanation of why cursing is the language of Hell: "All intelligent creatures are divided into three classes: First the Angels and Saints, whose country is heaven, and whose language is to praise and glorify God; secondly, the devils and the damned souls, who country is Hell and whose language is to blaspheme the God of Heaven and to curse their folly in having brought themselves to Hell by their own deliberate act; thirdly, we men still upon earth, travelling towards one or the other of these two countries. If a stranger be travelling about and can speak but one language, that language will show to what country he belongs, as it did St. Peter, in the Passion. So our language here will help us to discover which will be our country, hereafter in eternity."

Cursing also takes to itself the gravity of the scandal or bad example given not only to adults but especially to the young.

That this example is terrible in its evil efficiency is evident by the fact that everywhere on our streets, in our work-shops and factories, in our shops and mills, in our harvest-fields and fishing boats — yea, even among our school children, are to be heard the most shocking curses. A number of our young men, and sadly he said, even some of our young women, seem incapable of uttering a single sentence without interlarding it with an oath or a curse. "And he loved cursing," said the Psalmist, "and it shall come unto him; and he would not have blessing and it shall be far from him." (Ps. CVII. 18). Scripture tells us also of four cases in which the curse is heard of God. (1) The poor cursing the rich who oppose them — "The prayer of him (the poor) that curseth shall be heard" (Ecclus. IV. 6). (2) Widows and orphans cursing their oppressors — "The widows tears . . . the Lord will not be delighted with them." (Ecclus. XXXV. 18). (3) Parents cursing their children — "The mother's curse rooeth up the foundations." (Ecclus. III. 2), and (4) People cursing themselves — "He loved cursing and it shall come to him." (Ps. CVIII. 18), as when the Jews cried out at the crucifixion: "His Blood be upon us and upon our children." (Matth. XXVII. 25). Such cursing is always a mortal sin when the evil wished or prayed for is a grievous one and the one cursing knows and adverts to it being such, as also when the habit of cursing is continued. "But such as curse Him shall perish." (Ps. XXXVI. 22).

It is a venial sin when the evil wished is not a grave one or the sin is not deliberate, as also if earnest efforts are being made to correct the habit.

BLASPHEMING

Those are guilty of blaspheming who revile God, His Saints, or speak with contumely of objects connected with His Worship. We have very striking examples of blaspheming in the words and actions of the Emperor Julian the Apostate who always spoke of the Son of God as the Galilean (at that time a word of insult) and at His death when thrust with a lance, He is said to have thrown some of His blood towards Heaven, saying: "Thou has conquered, O Galilean"; or when Voltaire in France referred to the Divine Master as "The Infamous One". Those are guilty of blaspheming who deny the attributes of God, claiming that He is not just, not merciful, not infinite, who speak of Him with contempt as when they cried out in the Passion, "Vah! Thou that destroyest the Temple of God" — (Matth. XXXVII. 40), who wish there were no God to punish sin, who say God is guilty of sin, as when the Jews called our Lord a glutton (Matth. XI. 19), who perform any acts insulting to God as profaning the Sacred Host, placing a harlot on the altar and performing mock ceremonies before her as in the time of the French Revolution or who wish evil to God in any way.

There are also indirect ways of committing the sin of blasphemy when such is directed, (1) against the Blessed Virgin, the Saints or Religious as such, (2) against the Sacraments, the Scriptures and the Church, (3) by attributing to creatures what belong to God, as when the Jews attributed our Lord's miracles to Satan (Luke XI. 15).

St. Bernardine says that blasphemy is a sin peculiar to devils and rebukes for as the Holy Ghost speaks by the mouth of the good so the devils speak through the mouth of the blasphemer. St. Thomas declares that blasphemy is always a mortal sin unless it is committed in a hasty manner and without reflection. An unregretted habit of blaspheming is always mortal and rarely is grave sin absent because of the scandal given by such filthy language.

The most notorious blasphemer may say that he has no intentions of outraging the name of God, but merely swears through habit or anger. It is hard to admit that such excuses can very much diminish his guilt. His want of intention or deliberation may in some instances diminish his fault, but if your neighbor calls you opprobrious names day after day will you excuse him because he avers that he has no intention of offending you? Habit is not a real excuse for blasphemy for a man sins by acquiring the habit and the longer he continues in it the more guilty he becomes. If a person is in the habit of stealing your property you will not forgive him because of his bad habit, but you will have him brought before the court in order to recover your property and have him severely punished. God's honor is His property and the man who deprives Him of it will have to render accounts before His dread tribunal, where the plea of bad habits will be of no avail.

Nor can anger or impatience be alleged as an excuse for the offence. Anger is an inordinate movement of the soul and unless justified by good cause, as when the Saviour drove the money-changers from the temple, is always sinful and therefore increases the guilt of the offending party. "He that is impatient exalteth his folly." (Prov. XIV. 29).

All other sins are slight, says St. Jerome, in comparison with this, for other sins offend God indirectly, while blasphemy is a direct insult offered to His Most High Majesty. St. Ephrem addressing the blasphemer, exclaims: "Aughtest thou not to fear that fire may fall from Heaven upon thee and consume thee, if thou dost venture to asperse the name of the Almighty? Will not the earth open and swallow thee up? Deceive not thyself, O man, thou canst not escape the hand of the Omnipotent God." When the aged Bishop of Smyrna, St. Polycarp, was about to be burnt at the stake, the pro-consul addressing him from his tribunal, exhorted him to respect his age and save his life! "Swear by the genius of Caesar, and I discharge you, blaspheme Christ." The undaunted Bishop refused. "I have served Him these four-score and six years and He never did me any harm but much good; how can I blaspheme My King and Saviour."

The Holy Scripture abounds with incidents of the punishment God demands for the blasphemer. In the first place Our Divine Saviour assures us that there is a kind of blasphemy that will not be forgiven. "And I say to you that all sins shall be forgiven to the sons of men and the blasphemers wherewith they shall blaspheme; but he that blasphemeth against the Holy Ghost shall never have forgiveness, but shall be guilty of an everlasting sin." (Mark III. 28-29). This does not mean that the arm of God's mercy is shortened and a limit placed to His bounty and compassion, but, as St. Augustine says, the blasphemer is so obstinate in his sin that he refuses to be converted and therefore lives and dies in final impenitence and is lost through his own perverseness.

Even in this life blasphemy was made punishable by God with death. In the Book of Leviticus we read: "And when he had blasphemed the name and cursed it, He was brought to Moses. And they put Him in prison till they might know what the Lord would command." And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying: "Bring forth the blasphemer without the camp and let them that heard him put their hands upon his head: and let all the people stone him. And then speak to the children of Israel: The man that curseth his God shall fear his sin. And he that blasphemeth the name of the Lord, dying, let him die: all the multitude shall stone him whether he be a native or a stranger. He that blasphemeth the name of God, dying, let him die." (Lev. XXIV. 11-16). We read also of how Sennacherib for his blasphemy was slain by his sons, (IV. Kings XIX. 37); and how the tongue of Nicanor was cut out from his severed head and given by pieces to the birds, because he came with blasphemy against the holy people, (I. Mac. XX. 33).

Witnessing thus, dearly beloved, the anger of God and the punishment He inflicts upon blasphemers, a salutary fear for His Holy Name should be aroused within our souls. We may not for a moment think that God is not as jealous today of the honour due His name as He was in the time of the Jews. If the blasphemers today are not stoned to death because of their sins, as in the time of the Old Testament, it is not because their sin is less, but because the mercy of God, in view of the death of Christ and the redemption of mankind on the Cross, is more patient and long-suffering.

Secular authority very frequently punishes the blasphemer. St. Louis of France ordered the blasphemer to be seared on the lips with a red hot iron. This was done to a wealthy citizen of Paris with the result that in a short time no blasphemous expressions were heard within the Kingdom. According to the military law of Spain blasphemy was forbidden in the Army, and the blasphemers were expelled forthwith. In England: "Blasphemy or contumelious reproaches of the Saviour Christ, are



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