

BLESSED ARE THE POOR IN SPIRIT.....

BLESSED ARE THE MEEK OF HEART.....

By The Very Rev. Thomas N. Burke

ON THE FIRST BEATITUDE.

[Delivered at the Advent Conferences in the Catholic University, Dublin)

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven”

We are come together to consider the things that regard our eternal interests — to consider what we owe to God, to our neighbor, and to ourselves. We meet to reflect on the Divine law, the reasons and the extent of its obligations, and our own fulfilment of them.

Blessings being Catholics

In all this we have not to seek for the truth, but only to reflect upon it, and apply it to ourselves.

We have an infallible guide in truth — *the Church* — the pillar and the ground of truth. We are not forced, thank God, to fall back upon our own judgment, like those of whom St. Peter speaks, “blind and groping.” But to you I say, in the words of the same Apostle, “I will begin to put you in remembrance of these things, though indeed you know them and are confirmed in the present truth; but I think it meet to stir you up by putting you in remembrance.”

Not so with others, to whom an entrance has not been ministered into “the everlasting kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ.” They are obliged to inquire into everything, to attempt to prove everything, even first principles and the mysteries of revelation, and they are tempted to reject even the holiest truths of God, which are discussed before that most fallible tribunal — *the reason of man*. Of such, a great man formerly intimately connected with your university, complains, whilst yet a Protestant, in the introduction to one of his works. “Unhappy is it,” he says, “that we should be obliged to discuss and defend what a Christian people were intended to enjoy; to appeal to their intellects instead of ‘stirring up their pure mind, by way of admonition;’ to direct them towards articles of faith which should be their place of starting, and to treat as mere conclusions, what in other ages have been assumed as first principles.” “Surely life is not long enough to prove everything which may be made the subject of proof; and though inquiry is left partly open, in order to try our earnestness, yet it is in a great measure, and in the most important points, superseded by revelation, which discloses things which reason could not reach — saves us the labor, of using it when it might avail, and sanctions thereby the principle of dispensing it;” but he adds, “We have succeeded in raising clouds which effectually hide the sun from us; we have nothing left but to grope our way by reason as we best can — our necessary, because now our only guide. . . . We have asserted our right of debating every truth, however sacred, however protected from scrutiny heretofore; we have accounted that belief alone to be manly which commenced in doubt, that inquiry alone philosophical which assumed no first principles, that religion alone rational which we have created for ourselves;” and the end, my brethren, “loss of labor, division, and error have been the threefold gain of our self-will, as evidently visited in this world — not to follow it into the next.” Such was the testimony of a singularly deep and candid mind, even before it was yet enlightened by the pure rays of divine truth. But for us, we seek not to find out what is the truth. That we have already found. Our great Mother holds it, and propounds it, and we say to her in the words of the Apostle, “I know whom I have believed, and I am certain that she is able to keep that which hath been committed unto her,” (*Scio cui credidi et certus sum quia potens est depositum meum servare.*) the sacred deposit of all truth. But we inquire, “that we may be able to comprehend with all the saints, what is the breadth, and length and height, and depth of that divine truth.” To know also, “the charity of Christ, which surpasseth all knowledge,” i.e., to pursue the truth into all the details of its practical teaching in the moral law, where our faith reveals itself in charity “unto all the fulness of God.” This is the great object of the Catholic preacher, after the example of our Divine Lord himself; for it is worthy of remark, that His first Sermon on the Mount, in which we might naturally expect an exposition of

Christian dogma, was a moral sermon, sketching out the great features of the Christian character, by which His followers should be individually known amongst men to the end of time. Let us consider them:

First — “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

The first word spoken by our Lord was, “Blessed.” “Much people followed Him,” says the Evangelist, “from Galilee, and from Decapolis, and from Jerusalem, and from beyond the Jordan, and seeing the multitude, He went up into a mountain;” this was His pulpit — befitting the preacher and His

message. He was “the desired of the everlasting hills,” and it was written, “Get Thee up into a high mountain; Thou that bringest good tidings to Sion; lift up Thy voice, Thou that bringest good tidings to Jerusalem; lift it up, fear not; say to the cities of Juda, behold your God,” and opening His mouth, He taught them. The mouth of God, closed for four thousand years, and when last it spoke, it was to curse the first sinner and the earth in his work, “Cursed is the earth in thy work;” “the earth is infected;” (Isaias) “for the Lord hath spoken this word, . . . therefore shall a curse devour the earth.”

Christ, the Antithesis of Adam.

Now, it was fitting that Christ’s first word should be a revoking of this curse, for, as St. Paul loves to bring out, He was the antithesis of Adam. “As by the disobedience of one man, many were made sinners; so also, by the obedience of one man, many shall be made just, . . . therefore, as by the offence of one, unto all men to condemnation; so also, by the justice of one, unto all men to justification of life.” And yet, if we look into the blessing, we shall find that the curse pronounced upon the world is rather confirmed than revoked by it, for it says, “Blessed are the poor in spirit,” i.e., *Blessed are they who in some sense or other are alienated and separated from the world.*

Why Christ begins with the Spirit.

Mark that Christ begins with the spirit. First, because “God is a spirit, and they that adore Him must adore Him in spirit and in truth.” Hence, the Apostle says: “God is my witness whom I serve in my spirit.” And secondly, because *the spirit or seat of the affections* is that portion of man’s soul which guides and influences all the action of his life. There are *two* great portions — divisions — powers — faculties in the soul of man: first, the *apprehensive or intellectual*; and second, *the affective or appetitive*. To the first belongs the memory, and the office of this first great portion of the soul is to apprehend and preserve ideas, and from them to form knowledge. The second great division of the soul, which we have called the spirit (for the very word *suspirare* signifies desire), contains *the intellectual appetite or will*, the affections and desires; and as this will of man, which is led not only by the intellect but still more forcibly *by the passions or desires*, according to the saying of the poet, “*trahit sua quemque voluptas*,” determines his every act, for that act alone is human which proceeds from it, it follows that the portion of the soul which holds this will and these affections and desires is *the source and spring of all moral life in man*. Christ our Lord, therefore, began with the spirit, because He wished to change the face of the earth. “Send forth Thy Spirit, and they shall be created, and Thou shalt renew the face of the earth.” The Spirit of God was to go forth and to take the place of the human spirit, and Christianity was to effect this, that men should no longer be led by their own spirit — i. e., their own natural affections and desires — but by the Spirit of God. According to the word of the Apostle, “Whosoever are led by the Spirit of God they are the sons of God,” and thus they should “put on the Lord Jesus Christ; for if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of His.” But to Christians he says, “Know you not that you are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you?” Blessed, then says the Saviour, are the poor in spirit. Some commentators apply this word to those who are really poor, either by privation in the world or by the high voluntary poverty of holy religion which we find in the cloister. That the text bears such an application is abundantly proved from St. Luke, who adds in the context, “Woe to you who are rich, for you have your consolation.” Still, the text bears *a much more extended application*, and, therefore, others interpret poverty of spirit *to mean humility, the foundation, and, at the same time, the crown of all virtues*. This interpretation is also true, and the most adopted by the holy fathers. But we can find even more in this beatitude than the canonization of humility. As it was the first feature of the Christian character propounded by the Saviour, so, upon reflection, we find in this beatitude the first foundation of Christian life — namely, *Faith*, for truly the man who is poor in spirit means the man of faith. What is poverty? Poverty means

privation — an emptiness — an absence of something — a casting away from us and a renunciation of something. Poverty of spirit, then, would mean a casting away of desires — affections — appetites — seeing that the spirit of man is the seat of all these. But does Almighty God demand

of us a relinquishing of all affections and desires? In other words, does He demand of us a destruction of this great portion of our being? Certainly not. God is not a destroyer, nor is destruction pleasing to Him. It is not, then, so much the *destruction* as the *transfer* of our desires, hopes, affections, which Almighty God demands of us by poverty of spirit. There are two kinds of possessions — the temporal and the eternal — the visible and the invisible — the things of the present and those of the future — *the goods of sense and those of faith*. Now, man is naturally inclined to seek the things of this world rather than those of the world to come. He depends so much upon his senses, even for the things which belong to the soul, such as knowledge and even faith; he is so completely surrounded by sense that he is naturally inclined to rest in sense, to seek his happiness in the present enjoyment of sense, and to put away from him all consideration of future and unseen things. Much more are we unwilling to make any sacrifice for the sake of the unseen — to relinquish the visible for the invisible — to deprive ourselves of present enjoyment because of blessings to come. We all love ourselves faithfully — intensely. We love ourselves better than anything else — better than our neighbor — than virtue — than God.

Now, Christ our Lord, by redemption, made us the sons of God; “and he gave them power to become sons of God.” As such we must be different from the old, the natural man, in spirit — i.e., in thoughts, in desires, in affections, in views, in conduct. This the Apostle clearly points out when he says, “the first man was of the earth — earthly; the second man from heaven — heavenly. Such as is the earthly such also are the earthly, and such as is the heavenly such also are they that are heavenly, Therefore, as we have borne the image of the earthly, let us bear also the image of the heavenly.” But before we can thus put on the image of the heavenly man, so as to be made conformable to the Lord Jesus Christ — in a word, before we become Christians, we must cast away from us the old man, the human spirit, and hence *poverty of spirit is the beginning, the foundation, of the Christian character*. Faith is “the substance of things to be hoped for,” consequently, future blessings; “the conviction of things that appear not,” consequently, things not to be apprehended by the senses; for, says the Apostle, “*Per fidem ambulamus, et non per speciem.*” The man of faith is he who has views and desires beyond and above this world and sense, who makes not the things of sense the last and great object of his wishes and desires; who uses not at all the things that are, when they cross or impede his eternal interest (in other words, when they are sinful), and in the things which he uses has something in view beyond what is seen, and makes all that is created subservient to the uncreated, all that is temporal conducive to that which is eternal, all that is of earth serviceable for that which is heavenly. Such is the man of faith. Oh, glorious man, like to the Son of God!

ON THE SECOND BEATITUDE

[Delivered at the Advent Conference in the Catholic University, Dublin.]

“Blessed are the meek of heart, for they shall possess the land.”

THIS is the next feature of the Christian character brought out by our divine Lord. The Christian must be not only a man of faith — living for divine purposes — influenced by supernatural motives — grasping at the invisible beneath the forms of things that appear; but he must also be imbued with the virtue of meekness. Remember, gentlemen, that Christianity means perfection — the very perfection of man — of human nature in all its natural properties and powers — and, far beyond this — the perfection of human nature in all the supernatural gifts of divine grace. Life, according to St. Thomas Aquinas, is spontaneous motion. There are two kinds of motion — one produced by something external or extrinsic to the thing moved — as when the powerful attraction of the sun moves the inanimate earth. The other is caused by something internal or intrinsic, as when the human body is moved by the living soul or principle of motion within it. This St. Thomas calls intrinsic or spontaneous motion. If you reflect on the definition you will find it comprehensive and pertinent, for surely our idea of life is motion of some kind, and we naturally look upon perfect stillness as death. Now, all motion bears in its very essence the idea of a starting-point, of a point to be reached, and of an effort to pass from one to the other. Now, the Catholic Church teaches us that God is the starting-point of man —

that God is the point to be attained by him, and that our Lord Jesus Christ — God made man — is the way, the form, the model, the means, to conduct him to his end. “I am Alpha and Omega — the beginning and the end;” He says, and elsewhere, “I am the way, the truth, and the life;” for, says the Apostle, “there is but one God, and one Mediator between God and man, the man Jesus Christ.” The life thus proposed to us clearly involves all supernatural perfection of grace, for in “Christ abode all the fullness of the divinity corporally.” But, by an eternal law, that which is perfect in the highest order involves all the perfection of the lower; therefore, in seeking to be made conformable to the image of the Son of God, we come by all that is most perfect in the order of nature, and thus “godliness is profitable to all things, having promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come.” Let us see how far the virtue of meekness conduces to the natural and supernatural perfection of man. First, then, what is meekness?

What is Meekness?

Meekness is the virtue or power by which the passion of anger is so moderated and restrained as not to rise within us *except when necessary* and in the measure which is necessary. It is then, as you perceive, an *exercise of power* in the reason of man over the inferior appetites and powers of the soul. Man, as you know, is made up of body and soul — of matter and spirit — each with its own nature and its own powers — wonderfully united, and acting on each other in the one being. The soul has its own affections and desires, its own rational appetite, which is the will, guided and influenced by reason. But as this soul is joined to a material body, and depends for its impressions upon sense, there is also a *sensual appetite*; and depraved desire and passion in excess assail the soul. These sensitive appetites manifest themselves in two great master-passions in man, viz., concupiscence and anger; concupiscence, which prompts us to seek that which is or which we conceive to be desirable — anger, which disturbs and excites the soul, when that which is desirable is removed, or when we are impeded in its pursuit. Here then is man — as far as we have to deal with him — made up of intellect, will, passion of concupiscence and anger; and, besides the *theological virtues*, which entirely regard the supernatural perfection of man, we have the *cardinal virtues*, which may be said to regard his natural perfection, and they affect these four powers or passions; for prudence is in the intellect, justice in the will, temperance regards the passion of concupiscence, and fortitude that of anger. The more these virtues govern and influence their respective powers, the more perfect is man, in the order of nature. “*It belongs to human virtue*,” says St. Thomas, “*to make a man perfect by reducing his every act to the dominion of reason, which is done in three ways. 1st, The reason itself is rightly ordered, and this is done by the intellectual virtues or powers. 2nd, Reason thus ordered or perfected becomes the guide and ruler of all human affairs, through the medium of the virtue of justice; and, 3rd, All impediments to such guidance or government of reason are removed, (a), by the virtue of temperance, which restrains the will when it is drawn aside in pursuit of that which right reason forbids, and, (b), by fortitude, which overcomes, by strength of mind and will, the difficulties that arise in the way of virtue, just as a man by strength and energy of body conquers and repels all bodily difficulties.*” Thus we behold how all natural perfection in man consists in the perfect and absolute dominion of a well-ordered reason or mind. Perfection means order, for, observes the Angelic Master, the perfection and beauty of all creation consists in order. Now, our idea of order is that inferior things should be subject to things superior, and that what is supreme should govern all; but as the intellect or reason is the supreme power in man, it follows that man’s natural perfection must consist *in the dominion of this reason over all the inferior powers of the soul and all the passions and inclinations of the man*.

Thus it was with the first man as he came from the hands of God — a perfect being. “God made man right,” says the Preacher; and elsewhere, “He filled him with the knowledge of understanding, and He created in him the science of the spirit, and filled his heart with wisdom.” In that happy time, before sin found its entrance into the newly-created world, all was perfection, *because all was order*. The inferior animals and beings were perfectly subject to man. “Let us make man,” says the Lord, “to our image and likeness, and let him have dominion over the fishes of the sea, and the fowls of the air, and the beasts, and the whole earth, and every creeping creature that moveth upon the earth.” The senses, and all the inferior appetites in man himself, were *under complete control of the will*, which, in its turn *was ruled by a reason that was in perfect subjection to God*. But when this order was disturbed by sin — when man’s reason and will refused their obedience to God — then the inferior appetites and passions, in their turn, refused to be subject to the reason, and the creation of God, and the stubborn earth itself, rebelled against man. In losing the

supernatural gifts of grace and innocence, man lost also the very natural integrity and perfection of his being. *Such was the connection between nature and grace, that when grace departed the integrity of nature was also lost*, and humanity remained not only robbed and stripped of its divine clothing, but also mutilated and powerless. From all this it follows, first, that the passion which most directly and powerfully assails the dominion of reason — blinds it, overpowers it, casts it from its throne — is the *greatest impediment to man's natural perfection*. And, secondly, that the virtue or power which masters this passion — binds it down under the dominion of the mind, directs its energy, whilst it destroys its inordinate tendency — is the greatest safeguard of reason, and consequently most directly conducive to man's natural perfection.

What is Anger?

Now, gentlemen, *that passion is anger*, and *that virtue is meekness*. Well then may we conclude that Christ our Lord, in restoring to us the supernatural, and enabling us to acquire this virtue, has also given us back the integrity and natural perfection which Adam had lost. What is anger? Anger is defined : An inordinate desire of revenge. *The sensitive appetite, excited, inflamed by injury, real or imaginary, acts upon the will, inclining and inducing it to desire of revenge*. It is no longer reason guiding and directing the will, but the sensitive appetite, i.e., an inferior power of the soul, directing a superior — consequently, *an inversion of order*. The very nature of anger is to act and desire without right reflection. Hence, nothing is more common than to plead anger as an excuse for irrational acts. We say, a man did such a thing under the great excitement of anger, consequently he cannot be held accountable — we must excuse him. Yes — excuse him; but the very plea put forward in his defence shows *how completely reason is destroyed, for the time being, by this passion*, for, as the poet says, "*ira furor brevis est*" — *it is a temporary madness*. We sometimes hear the phrase, "maddened by anger;" and the very law speaks of the murder committed in anger, as manslaughter — one animal slaughtering another. We never speak of a man as maddened by pride, maddened by lust — but maddened by anger. A man in anger is recognized as an unreasoning animal. He no longer answers to the definition of man, "*animal rationale*." In fact, if right reason were supposed to rule him, we should cease to look upon him as angry, for it is not the excitement, but the inordinate, unreasoning excess of it, amounting to perturbation of mind and subversion of reason, which constitutes the sin of anger. There is an excitement which has all the appearance of anger, and which even leads to terrible results, and yet is sinless, because under the control of a well-ordered mind. St. Chrysostom says: "He that is angry without cause, sins; but he who has sufficient cause, sins not. *Nam si ira non fuerit nec doctrina proficit nee judicia stant — nec crimina compescuntur.*"

Such was the indignation of Moses, "the meekest of men." He saw an Egyptian strike one of the Hebrews, his brethren . . . he slew the Egyptian and hid him in the sand. And again, "When he came nigh to the camp he saw the calf and the dances, and, being very angry, he threw the tables out of his hand and broke them at the foot of the mount . . . and standing in the gate of the camp he said: If any man be on the Lord's side let him join with me; and all the sons of Levi gathered themselves together unto him, and he said to them, Thus saith the Lord, the God of Israel; put every man his sword upon his thigh; go and return from gate to gate through the midst of the camp, and let every man kill his brother and friend and neighbor. And the sons of Levi did according to the words of Moses, and there were slain that day about three and twenty thousand men." And yet what says the Holy Ghost? "Moses was a man exceeding meek above all men that dwelt upon earth." Such again was the noble indignation of Mathathias . . . "a priest of the sons of Joarib;" for when "there came a certain Jew in the sight of all to sacrifice to the idols upon the altar in the city of Modin, according to the king's commandment. And Mathathias saw and was grieved, and his veins trembled, and his wrath was kindled *according to the judgment of the law*, and running upon him he slew him upon the altar." We can go far higher for an illustration of the word of the Psalmist, "Be ye angry and sin not." "And Jesus went up to Jerusalem; and He found in the temple them that sold oxen and sheep and doves, and the changers of money sitting. And when He had made as it were a scourge of little cords, He drove them all out of the temple . . . and the money of the changers He poured out, and the tables He overthrew." But in all these and the like examples, a high and perfect motive of reason governed and directed the acts; as in Moses, the inspiration of God; in Mathathias, the "*judgment of the law*;" and in our blessed Lord, a devouring zeal for the glory and honor of His Father's house. There is then, as you perceive, a good and a bad anger; one anger justifiable and another unjustifiable. Hence Aristotle

says, “He is worthy of praise or of blame, who is sometimes angry.” When is anger sinful, when is it not? *It is sinful, first, when we desire vindication or revenge for its own sake, and not for the lawful end of correction of our neighbor;* or when we wish to see the innocent punished or to have excessive punishment inflicted on the guilty; or when we wish to subvert the legitimate order and course of justice; in a word, *when the desire is contrary to right reason.* Secondly, *anger is sinful when the motion or excitement is allowed to become too vehement,* so as to be rage, either internal or external, for thus it takes the place of reason; and St. Gregory the Great says, “All care must be taken lest anger, which should be the handmaid of virtue, be allowed to predominate in the mind; lest she should become mistress, who, like an obedient servant, should stand behind reason.” But no passion more completely destroys reason, as we have seen, than inordinate and sinful anger; nay, more, it deforms even the exterior man, making him like to a demon; hence St. John Chrysostom says, “Nothing is more frightful than the face of an infuriated man;” for, says St. Gregory, quoting indeed from Seneca, “The excited heart throbs — the body trembles — the senseless tongue pours forth incoherent words — the inflamed countenance fires with rage — the furious eyes sparkle again!” and, concludes the mild philosopher, “What must the angry soul be whose external image is so foul and deformed!”

Glories of meekness

If such be anger, how high and glorious must that virtue be which conquers, moderates, and restrains it — which either represses it altogether, so as to preserve perfect peace of soul and body, or permits it to rise only as far as reason permits or demands, and thus makes a virtue of what may be so hideous a vice — and such is meekness. Many persons, particularly the young, look upon meekness as something unnecessary and superfluous — a virtue of the cloister, or of females, and of the old. And thus blinded and misled, they allow an evil, impetuous temper and passion to enslave them. And yet, surely, *there is no virtue more manly or ennobling than that which enables a man to govern himself and his own passions.* How can a man rule others who is unable to rule himself? How can a man associate with others who is powerless and unable to live with his own soul in peace? He truly is fitted to be an Anax Andron — a king of men — who has learned by meekness to keep the little kingdom of his own soul and body in the *proper order of subjection to reason.* Every virtue is a power — the very word virtue means power; and what is more terrible in its power than meekness? We admire the strength of Samson, quietly turning aside into the vineyard and tearing the lion as he would have torn a kid in pieces: far more wonderful is the strength of him who can seize the demon of anger, and chain him down as the archangel chained Lucifer. St. Thomas asks the question whether meekness be the greatest of moral virtues? After some distinctions he answers: “In one sense, meekness has a peculiar excellence amongst the virtues; for as anger, on account of its impetuosity and suddenness, deprives the soul (more than any other passion) of freedom and of the power of judgment, so meekness, which governs anger, preserves unto man (beyond all other virtues) the possession of himself;” hence *Ecclesiasticus* saith, “My son, keep thy soul in meekness and give it honor according to its deserts. Who will justify him that sinneth against his own soul? Who will honor him that dishonoreth his own soul?” How powerless is the angry man when he is confronted by one who holds his soul and his temper in meekness! How futile was the rage of the Pharisees and priests in presence of the meekness of Jesus Christ! We have seen how far this virtue contributes to our natural perfection; let us now consider its supernatural excellence. The perfection of man in the supernatural order of grace is to be made like to the Lord Jesus Christ, by grace here — by glory hereafter. “Those whom He foreknew and predestinated to be made conformable to the image of His Son, the same also He called, and whom He called the same also He justified, and whom He justified the same also He glorified.” The resemblance of grace here reveals itself in virtues, and foremost of these is meekness, because our divine Lord Himself puts it first, saying, Learn of Me, because I am meek and humble of heart.”
