

THE SERMONS OF ST. JOHN MARY VIANNEY

No.1

THE DREADFUL STATE OF THE LUKEWARM SOUL

In speaking to you today, my dear brethren, of the dreadful state of the lukewarm soul, my purpose is not to paint for you a terrifying and despairing picture of the soul which is living in mortal sin without even having the wish to escape from this condition. That poor unfortunate creature can but look forward to the wrath of God in the next life. Alas! These sinners hear me; they know well of whom I am speaking at this very moment.... We will go no further, for all that I would wish to say would serve only to harden them more. In speaking to you, my brethren, of the lukewarm soul, I do not wish, either, to speak of those who make neither their Easter duty nor their annual Confession.

They know very well that in spite of all their prayers and their other good works they will be lost. Let us leave them in their blindness, since they want to remain that way....

Nor do I understand, brethren, by the lukewarm soul, that soul who would like to be worldly without ceasing to be a child of God. You will see such a one at one moment prostrate before God, his Saviour and his Master, and the next moment similarly prostrate before the world, his idol.

Poor blind creature, who gives one hand to God and the other to the world, so that he can call both to his aid, and promise his heart to each in turn! He loves God, or rather, he would like to love Him, but he would also like to please the world. Then, weary of wanting to give his allegiance to both, he ends by giving it to the world alone. This is an extraordinary life and one which offers so strange a spectacle that it is hard to persuade oneself that it could be the life of one and the same person. I am going to show you this so clearly that perhaps many among you will be hurt by it. But that will matter little to me, for I am always going to tell you what I ought to tell you, and then you will do what you wish about it....

I would say further, my brethren, that whoever wants to please both the world and God leads one of the most unhappy of lives. You shall see how. Here is someone who gives himself up to the pleasures of the world or develops some evil habit.

How great is his fear when he comes to fulfil his religious duties; that is, when he says his prayers, when he goes to Confession, or wants to go to Holy Communion! He does not want to be seen by those with whom he has been dancing and passing nights at the cabarets, where he has been giving himself over to many kinds of licentiousness. Has he come to the stage when he is going to deceive his confessor by hiding the worst of his actions and thus obtain permission to go to Holy Communion, or rather, to commit a sacrilege? He would prefer to go to Holy Communion before or after Mass, that is to say, when there is no one present. Yet he is quite happy to be seen by the good people who know nothing about his evil life and among whom he would like to arouse good opinions about himself. In front of devout people he talks about religion. When he is with those who have no religion, he will talk only about the pleasures of the world. He would blush to fulfil his religious practices in front of his companions or those boys and girls who share his evil ways....

This is so true that one day someone asked me to allow him to go to Holy Communion in the sacristy so that no one would see him. Is it possible, my brethren, that one could think upon such horrible behaviour without shuddering?

But we shall proceed further and you will see the embarrassment of these poor people who want to follow the world without—outwardly at any rate—leaving God. Here is Easter approaching. They must go to Confession. It is not, of course, that they want to go or that they feel any urge or need to receive the Sacrament of Penance. They would be only too pleased if Easter came around about once every thirty years. But their parents still retain the exterior practice of religion. They will be happy if their children go to the altar, and they keep urging them, then, to go to Confession. In this, of course, they make a mistake. If only they would just pray for them and not torment them into committing sacrileges. So to rid themselves of the importunity of their parents, to keep up appearances, these people will get together to find out who is the best confessor to try for absolution for the first or second time

"Look," says one, "my parents keep nagging at me because I haven't been to Confession. Where shall we go?" "It is of no use going to our parish priest; he is too scrupulous. He would not allow us to make our Easter duty. We will

have to try to find So-and-So. He let this one and that one go through, and they are worse than we are. We have done no more harm than they have."

Another will say: "I assure you that if it were not for my parents I would not make my Easter duty at all. Our catechism says that to make a good Confession we must give up sin and the occasions of sin, and we are doing neither the one nor the other. I tell you sincerely that I am really embarrassed every time Easter comes around. I will be glad when the time comes for me to settle down and to cease gallivanting. I will make a confession then of my whole life, to put right the ones I am making now. Without that I would not die happy."

"Well," another will say to him, "when that time comes you ought to go to the priest who has been hearing your confessions up to the present. He will know you best." "Indeed no! I will go to the one who would not give me absolution, because he would not want to see me damned either."

"My word, aren't you good! That means nothing at all. They all have the same power."

"That is a good thing to remember when we are doing what we ought to do. But when we are in sin, we think otherwise."

One day I went to see a girl who was pretty careless. She told me that she was not going back to Confession to the priests who were so easy and who, in making it seem as if they wanted to save you, pushed you into Hell." That is how many of these poor blind people behave! "Father," they will say to the priest, "I am going to Confession to you because our parish priest is too exacting. He wants to make us promise things which we cannot hold to. He would have us all saints, and that is not possible in the world. He would want us never to go to dances, nor to frequent cabarets or amusements. If someone has a bad habit, he will not give Absolution until the habit has been given up completely. If we had to do all that we should never make our Easter duty at all. My parents, who are very religious, are always after me to make my Easter duty. I will do all I can. But no one can say that he will never return to these amusements, since he never knows when he is going to encounter them."

"Ah!" says the confessor, quite deceived by this sincere sounding talk, "I think your parish priest is perhaps a little exacting. Make your act of contrition, and I will give you Absolution. Try to be good now."

That is to say: Bow your head; you are going to trample in the adorable Blood of Jesus Christ; you are going to sell your God like Judas sold Him to His executioners, and tomorrow you will go to Holy Communion, where you will proceed to crucify Him. What horror! What abomination! Go on, vile Judas, go to the holy table, go and give death to your God and your Saviour! Let your conscience cry out, only try to stifle its remorse as much as you can.... But I am going too far, my brethren. Let us leave these poor blind creatures in their gloom.

I think, brethren, that you would like to know what is the state of the lukewarm soul. Well, this is it. A lukewarm soul is not yet quite dead in the eyes of God because the faith, the hope, and the charity which are its spiritual life are not altogether extinct. But it is a faith without zeal, a hope without resolution, a charity without ardour....

Nothing touches this soul: it hears the word of God, yes, that is true; but often it just bores it. Its possessor hears it with difficulty, more or less by habit, like someone who thinks that he knows enough about it and does enough of what he should.

Any prayers which are a bit long are distasteful to him. This soul is so full of whatever it has just been doing or what it is going to do next, its boredom is so great, that this poor unfortunate thing is almost in agony. It is still alive, but it is not capable of doing anything to gain Heaven....

For the last twenty years this soul has been filled with good intentions without doing anything at all to correct its habits.

It is like someone who is envious of anyone who is on top of the world but who would not deign to lift a foot to try to get there himself. It would not, however, wish to renounce eternal blessings for those of the world. Yet it does not wish either to leave the world or to go to Heaven, and if it can just manage to pass its time without crosses or difficulties, it would never ask to leave this world at all. If you hear someone with such a soul say that life is long and pretty miserable, that is only when everything is not going in accordance with his desires. If God, in order to force such a soul to detach itself from temporal things, sends it any cross or suffering, it is fretful and grieving and abandons itself to grumbles and complaints and often even to a kind of despair. It seems as if it does not want to see that God has sent it these trials for its good, to detach it from this world and to draw it towards Himself. What has it done to

deserve these trials? In this state a person thinks in his own mind that there are many others more blameworthy than himself who have not to submit to such trials.

In prosperous times the lukewarm soul does not go so far as to forget God, but neither does it forget itself. It knows very well how to boast about all the means it has employed to achieve its prosperity. It is quite convinced that many others would not have achieved the same success. It loves to repeat that and to hear it repeated, and every time it hears it, it is with fresh pleasure. The individual with the lukewarm soul assumes a gracious air when associating with those who flatter him. But towards those who have not paid him the respect which he believes he has deserved or who have not been grateful for his kindnesses, he maintains an air of frigid indifference and seems to indicate to them that they are ungrateful creatures who do not deserve to receive the good which he has done them....

If I wanted to paint you an exact picture, my brethren, of the state of a soul which lives in tepidity, I should tell you that it is like a tortoise or a snail. It moves only by dragging itself along the ground, and one can see it getting from place to place with great difficulty. The love of God, which it feels deep down in itself, is like a tiny spark of fire hidden under a heap of ashes.

The lukewarm soul comes to the point of being completely indifferent to its own loss. It has nothing left but a love without tenderness, without action, and without energy which sustains it with difficulty in all that is essential for salvation. But for all other means of Grace, it looks upon them as nothing or almost nothing. Alas, my brethren, this poor soul in its tepidity is like someone between two bouts of sleep. It would like to act, but its will has become so softened that it lacks either the force or the courage to accomplish its wishes.

It is true that a Christian who lives in tepidity still regularly—in appearance at least—fulfils his duties. He will indeed get down on his knees every morning to say his prayers. He will go to the Sacraments every year at Easter and even several times during the course of the twelve months. But in all of this there will be such a distaste, so much slackness and so much indifference, so little preparation, so little change in his way of life, that it is easy to see that he is only fulfilling his duties from habit and routine because this is a feast and he is in the habit of carrying them out at such a time. His Confessions and his Communions are not sacrilegious, if you like, but they are Confessions and Communions which bear no fruit—which, far from making him more perfect and more pleasing to God, only make him more unworthy. As for his prayers, God alone knows what—without, of course, any preparation—he makes of these.

In the morning it is not God who occupies his thoughts, nor the salvation of his poor soul; he is quite taken up with thoughts of work. His mind is so wrapped up in the things of earth that the thought of God has no place in it. He is thinking about what he is going to be doing during the day, where he will be sending his children and his various employees, in what way he will expedite his own work. To say his prayers, he gets down on his knees, undoubtedly, but he does not know what he wants to ask God, nor what he needs, nor even before whom he is kneeling. His careless demeanour shows this very clearly. It is a poor man indeed who, however miserable he is, wants nothing at all and loves his poverty. It is surely a desperately sick person who scorns doctors and remedies and clings to his infirmities.

You can see that this lukewarm soul has no difficulty, on the slightest pretext, in talking during the course of his prayers.

For no reason at all he will abandon them, partly at least, thinking that he will finish them in another moment. Does he want to offer his day to God, to say his Grace? He does all that, but often without thinking of the one who is addressed. He will not even stop working. If the possessor of the lukewarm soul is a man, he will turn his cap or his hat around in his hands as if to see whether it is good or bad, as though he had some idea of selling it. If it is a woman, she will say her prayers while slicing bread into her soup, or putting wood on the fire, or calling out to her children or maid. If you like, such distractions during prayer are not exactly deliberate. People would rather not have them, but because it is necessary to go to so much trouble and expend so much energy to get rid of them, they let them alone and allow them to come as they will.

The lukewarm Christian may not perhaps work on Sunday at tasks which seem to be forbidden to anyone who has even the slightest shred of religion, but doing some sewing, arranging something in the house, driving sheep to the fields during the times for Masses, on the pretext that there is not enough food to give them—all these things will be done without the slightest scruple, and such people will prefer to allow their souls and the souls of their employees to

perish rather than endanger their animals. A man will busy himself getting out his tools and his carts and harrows and so on, for the next day; he will fill in a hole or fence a gap; he will cut various lengths of cords and ropes; he will carry out the churns and set them in order. What do you think about all this, my brethren? Is it not, alas, the simple truth?

A lukewarm soul will go to Confession regularly, and even quite frequently. But what kind of Confessions are they? No preparation, no desire to correct faults, or, at the least, a desire so feeble and so small that the slightest difficulty will put a stop to it altogether. The Confessions of such a person are merely repetitions of old ones, which would be a happy state of affairs indeed if there were nothing to add to them. Twenty years ago he was accusing himself of the same things he confesses today, and if he goes to Confession for the next twenty years, he will say the same things. A lukewarm soul will not, if you like, commit the big sins. But some slander or back-biting, a lie, a feeling of hatred, of dislike, of jealousy, a slight touch of deceit or double-dealing—these count for nothing with it. If it is a woman and you do not pay her all the respect which she considers her due, she will, under the guise of pretending that God has been offended, make sure that you realise it; she could say more than that, of course, since it is she herself who has been offended. It is true that such a woman would not stop going to the Sacraments, but her dispositions are worthy of compassion.

On the day when she wants to receive her God, she spends part of the morning thinking of temporal matters. If it is a man, he will be thinking about his deals and his sales. If it is a married woman, she will be thinking about her household and her children. If it is a young girl, her thoughts will be on her clothes.

If it is a boy, he will be dreaming about passing pleasures and so on. The lukewarm soul shuts God up in an obscure and ugly kind of prison. Its possessor does not crucify Him, but God can find little joy or consolation in his heart.

All his dispositions proclaim that his poor soul is struggling for the breath of life.

After having received Holy Communion, this person will hardly give another thought to God in all the days to follow. His manner of life tells us that he did not know the greatness of the happiness which had been his.

A lukewarm Christian thinks very little upon the state of his poor soul and almost never lets his mind run over the past. If the thought of making any effort to be better crosses his mind at all, he believes that once he has confessed his sins, he ought to be perfectly happy and at peace. He assists at Holy Mass very much as he would at any ordinary activity. He does not think at all seriously of what he is doing and finds no trouble in chatting about all sorts of things while on the way there. Possibly he will not give a single thought to the fact that he is about to participate in the greatest of all the gifts that God, all-powerful as He is, could give us. He does give some thought to the needs of his own soul, yes, but a very small and feeble amount of thought indeed. Frequently he will even present himself before the presence of God without having any idea of what he is going to ask of Him. He has few scruples in cutting out, on the least pretext, the Asperges and the prayers before Mass. During the course of the service, he does not want to go to sleep, of course, and he is even afraid that someone might see him, but he does not do himself any violence all the same. He does not want, of course, to have distractions during prayer or during the Holy Mass, yet when he should put up some little fight against them, he suffers them very patiently, considering the fact that he does not like them. Fast days are reduced to practically nothing, either by advancing the time of the main meal or, under the pretext that Heaven was never taken by famine, by making the collation so abundant that it amounts to a full meal. When he performs good or beneficial actions, his intentions are often very mixed—sometimes it is to please someone, sometimes it is out of compassion, and sometimes it is just to please the world. With such people everything that is not a really serious sin is good enough. They like doing good, being faithful, but they wish that it did not cost them anything or, at least, that it cost very little. They would like to visit the sick, indeed, but it would be more convenient if the sick would come to them. They have something to give away in alms, they know quite well that a certain person has need of help, but they wait until she comes to ask them instead of anticipating her, which would make the kindness so very much more meritorious. We will even say, my brethren, that the person who leads a lukewarm life does not fail to do plenty of good works, to frequent the Sacraments, to assist regularly at all church services, but in all of this one sees only a weak, languishing faith, hope which the slightest trial will upset, a love of God and of neighbour which is without warmth or pleasure. Everything that such a person does is not entirely lost, but it is very nearly so.

See, before God, my brethren, on what side you are. On the side of the sinners, who have abandoned everything and plunge themselves into sin without remorse? On the side of the just souls, who seek but God alone? Or are you of the number of these slack, tepid, and indifferent souls such as we have just been depicting for you? Down which road are you travelling?

Who can dare assure himself that he is neither a great sinner nor a tepid soul but that he is one of the elect? Alas, my brethren, how many seem to be good Christians in the eyes of the world who are really tepid souls in the eyes of God, Who knows our inmost hearts....

Let us ask God with all our hearts, if we are in this state, to give us the grace to get out of it, so that we may take the route that all the saints have taken and arrive at the happiness that they are enjoying. That is what I desire for you....
