

THE SERMONS OF ST. JOHN MARY VIANNEY

NO. 5

WE ARE NOTHING IN OURSELVES

Temptation is necessary to us to make us realise that we are nothing in ourselves. St. Augustine tells us that we should thank God as much for the sins from which He has preserved us as for those which He has had the charity to forgive us. If we have the misfortune to fall so often into the snares of the Devil, we set ourselves up again too much on the strength of our own resolutions and promises and too little upon the strength of God. This is very true. When we do nothing to be ashamed of, when everything is going along according to our wishes, we dare to believe that nothing could make us fall. We forget our own nothingness and our utter weakness. We make the most delightful protestations that we are ready to die rather than to allow ourselves to be conquered. We see a splendid example of this in St. Peter, who told our Lord that although all others might be scandalised in Him, yet he would never deny Him.

Alas! To show him how man, left to himself, is nothing at all, God made use, not of kings or princes or weapons, but simply of the voice of a maidservant, who even appeared to speak to him in a very indifferent sort of way. A moment ago, he was ready to die for Him, and now Peter protests that he does not even know Him, that he does not know about whom they are speaking. To assure them even more vehemently that he does not know Him, he swears an oath about it. Dear Lord, what we are capable of when we are left to ourselves! There are some who, in their own words, are envious of the saints who did great penances. They believe that they could do as well. When we read the lives of some of the martyrs, we would, we think, be ready to suffer all that they suffered for God; the moment is shortlived, we say, for an eternity of reward. But what does God do to teach us to know ourselves or, rather, to know that we are nothing? This is all He does: He allows the Devil to come a little closer to us. Look at this Christian who a moment ago was quite envious of the hermit who lived solely on roots and herbs and who made the stern resolution to treat his body as harshly. Alas! A slight headache, a prick of a pin, makes him, as big and strong as he is, sorry for himself. He is very upset. He cries with pain. A moment ago he would have been willing to do all the penances of the anchorites—and the merest trifle makes him despair! Look at this other one, who seems to want to give his whole life for God, whose ardour all the torments there are cannot damp. A tiny bit of scandalmongering a word of calumny even a slightly cold reception or a small injustice done to him a kindness returned by ingratitude immediately gives birth in him to feelings of hatred, of revenge, of dislike, to the point, often, of his never wishing to see his neighbour again or at least of treating him coldly with an air which shows very plainly what is going on in his heart. And how many times is this his waking thought, just as it was the thought that almost prevented him from sleeping? Alas, my dear brethren, we are poor stuff, and we should count very little upon our good resolutions!

BEWARE IF YOU HAVE NO TEMPTATIONS

Whom does the devil pursue most? Perhaps you are thinking that it must be those who are tempted most; these would undoubtedly be the habitual drunkards, the scandalmongers, the immodest and shameless people who wallow in moral filth, and the miser, who hoards in all sorts of ways. No, my dear brethren no, it is not these people. On the contrary, the Devil despises them, or else he holds onto them, lest they not have a long enough time in which to do evil, because the longer they live, the more their bad example will drag souls into Hell. Indeed, if the Devil had pursued this lewd and shameless old fellow too closely, he might have shortened the latter's life by fifteen or twenty years, and he would not then have destroyed the virginity of that young girl by plunging her into the unspeakable mire of his indecencies; he would not, again, have seduced that wife, nor would he have taught his evil lessons to that young man, who will perhaps continue to practice them until his death. If the Devil had prompted this thief to rob on every occasion, he would long since have ended on the scaffold and so he would not have induced his neighbour to follow his example. If the Devil had urged this drunkard to fill himself unceasingly with wine, he would long ago have perished in his debaucheries, instead of which, by living longer, he has made many others like himself. If the Devil had taken away the life of this musician, of that dance-hall owner, of this cabaret keeper, in some raid or scuffle,

or on any other occasion, how many souls would there be who, without these people, would not be damned and who now will be? St. Augustine teaches us that the Devil does not bother these people very much; on the contrary, he despises them and spits upon them. So, you will ask me, who then are the people most tempted? They are these, my friends; note them carefully. The people most tempted are those who are ready, with the grace of God, to sacrifice everything for the salvation of their poor souls, who renounce all those things which most people eagerly seek. It is not one devil only who tempts them, but millions seek to entrap them. We are told that St. Francis of Assisi and all his religious were gathered on an open plain, where they had built little huts of rushes. Seeing the extraordinary penances which were being practiced, St. Francis ordered that all instruments of penance should be brought out, whereupon his religious produced them in bundles. At this moment there was one young man to whom God gave the grace to see his Guardian Angel. On the one side he saw all of these good religious, who could not satisfy their hunger for penance, and, on the other, his Guardian Angel allowed him to see a gathering of eighteen thousand devils, who were holding counsel to see in what way they could subvert these religious by temptation. One of the devils said: "You do not understand this at all. These religious are so humble; ah, what wonderful virtue, so detached from themselves, so attached to God! They have a superior who leads them so well that it is impossible to succeed in winning them over. Let us wait until their superior is dead, and then we shall try to introduce among them young people without vocations who will bring about a certain slackening of spirit, and in this way we shall gain them."

A little further on, as he entered the town, he saw a devil, sitting by himself beside the gate into the town, whose task was to tempt all of those who were inside. This saint asked his Guardian Angel why it was that in order to tempt this group of religious there had been so many thousands of devils while for a whole town there was but one—and that one sitting down. His good angel told him that the people of the town had not the same need of temptations, that they had enough bad in themselves, while the religious were doing good despite all the traps which the Devil could lay for them.

The first temptation, my dear brethren, which the Devil tries on anyone who has begun to serve God better is in the matter of human respect. He will no longer dare to be seen around; he will hide himself from those with whom heretofore he had been mixing and pleasure seeking. If he should be told that he has changed a lot, he will be ashamed of it! What people are going to say about him is continually in his mind, to the extent that he no longer has enough courage to do good before other people. If the Devil cannot get him back through human respect, he will induce an extraordinary fear to possess him that his confessions are not good, that his confessor does not understand him, that whatever he does will be all in vain, that he will be damned just the same, that he will achieve the same result in the end by letting everything slide as by continuing to fight, because the occasions of sin will prove too many for him. Why is it, my dear brethren, that when someone gives no thought at all to saving his soul, when he is living in sin, he is not tempted in the slightest, but that as soon as he wants to change his life, in other words, as soon as the desire to give his life to God comes to him, all Hell falls upon him? Listen to what St. Augustine has to say: "Look at the way," he tells us, "in which the Devil behaves towards the sinner. He acts like a jailer who has a great many prisoners locked up in his prison but who, because he has the key in his pocket, is quite happy to leave them, secure in the knowledge that they cannot get out. This is his way of dealing with the sinner who does not consider the possibility of leaving his sin behind. He does not go to the trouble of tempting him. He looks upon this as time wasted because not only is the sinner not thinking of leaving him, but the Devil does not desire to multiply his chains. It would be pointless, therefore, to tempt him. He allows him to live in peace, if, indeed, it is possible to live in peace when one is in sin. He hides his state from the sinner as much as is possible until death, when he then tries to paint a picture of his life so terrifying as to plunge him into despair. But with anyone who has made up his mind to change his life, to give himself up to God, that is another thing altogether."

While St. Augustine lived in sin and evil, he was not aware of anything by which he was tempted. He believed himself to be at peace, as he tells us himself. But from the moment that he desired to turn his back upon the Devil, he had to struggle with him, even to the point of losing his breath in the fight. And that lasted for five years. He wept the most bitter of tears and employed the most austere of penances: "I argued with him," he says, "in my chains. One day I thought myself victorious, the next I was prostrate on the earth again. This cruel and stubborn war went on for five years. However, God gave me the grace to be victorious over my enemy."

You may see, too, the struggle which St. Jerome endured when he desired to give himself to God and when he had the thought of visiting the Holy Land. When he was in Rome, he conceived a new desire to work for his salvation. Leaving Rome, he buried himself in a fearsome desert to give himself over to everything with which his love of God could inspire him. Then the Devil, who foresaw how greatly his conversion would affect others, seemed to burst with fury and despair. There was not a single temptation that he spared him. I do not believe that there is any saint who was as strongly tempted as he. This is how he wrote to one of his friends: "My dear friend, I wish to confide in you about my affliction and the state to which the Devil seeks to reduce me. How many times in this vast solitude, which the heat of the sun makes insupportable, how many times the pleasures of Rome have come to assail me! The sorrow and the bitterness with which my soul is filled cause me, night and day, to shed floods of tears. I proceed to hide myself in the most isolated places to struggle with my temptations and there to weep for my sins. My body is all disfigured and covered with a rough hair shirt. I have no other bed than the naked ground and my only food is coarse roots and water, even in my illnesses. In spite of all these rigours, my body still experiences thoughts of the squalid pleasures with which Rome is poisoned; my spirit finds itself in the midst of those pleasant companionships in which I so greatly offended God. In this desert to which I have condemned myself to avoid Hell, among these sombre rocks, where I have no other companions than the scorpions and the wild beasts, my spirit still bums my body, already dead before myself, with an impure fire; the Devil still dares to offer it pleasures to taste. I behold myself so humiliated by these temptations, the very thought of which makes me die with horror, and not knowing what further austerities I should exert upon my body to attach it to God, that I throw myself on the ground at the foot of my crucifix, bathing it with my tears, and when I can weep no more I pick up stones and beat my breast with them until the blood comes out of my mouth, begging for mercy until the Lord takes pity upon me.

Is there anyone who can understand the misery of my state, desiring so ardently to please God and to love Him alone?

Yet I see myself constantly prone to offend Him. What sorrow this is for me! Help me, my dear friend, by the aid of your prayers, so that I may be stronger in repelling the Devil, who has sworn my eternal damnation." These, my dear brethren, are the struggles to which God permits his great saints to be exposed. Alas, how we are to be pitied if we are not fiercely harried by the Devil! According to all appearances, we are the friends of the Devil: he lets us live in a false peace, he lulls us to sleep under the pretence that we have said some good prayers, given some alms, that we have done less harm than others. According to our standard, my dear brethren, if you were to ask, for instance, this pillar of the cabaret if the Devil tempted him, he would answer quite simply that nothing was bothering him at all. Ask this young girl, this daughter of vanity, what her struggles are like, and she will tell you laughingly that she has none at all, that she does not even know what it is to be tempted. There you see, my dear brethren, the most terrifying temptation of all, which is not to be tempted.

There you see the state of those whom the Devil is preserving for Hell. If I dared, I would tell you that he takes good care not to tempt or torment such people about their past lives, lest their eyes be opened to their sins. The greatest of all evils is not to be tempted because there are then grounds for believing that the Devil looks upon us as his property and that he is only awaiting our deaths to drag us into Hell. Nothing could be easier to understand. Just consider the Christian who is trying, even in a small way, to save his soul.

Everything around him inclines him to evil; he can hardly lift his eyes without being tempted, in spite of all his prayers and penances. And yet a hardened sinner, who for the past twenty years has been wallowing in sin, will tell you that he is not tempted! So much the worse, my friend, so much the worse! That is precisely what should make you tremble—that you do not know what temptations are. For to say that you are not tempted is like saying the Devil no longer exists or that he has lost all his rage against Christian souls." If you have no temptations," St. Gregory tells us, "it is because the devils are your friends, your leaders, and your shepherds. And by allowing you to pass your poor life tranquilly, to the end of your days, they will drag you down into the depths." St. Augustine tells us that the greatest temptation is not to have temptations because this means that one is a person who has been rejected, abandoned by God, and left entirely in the grip of one's own passions.

THE DUTIES OF THE PREGNANT WOMAN

I am going to talk to you as simply as I possibly can, so that you can easily understand what your duties are and carry them out. I tell you:

1. That as soon as a woman is pregnant, she should say some prayers or give some alms. Better still, if she can do so, she should have a Mass said to ask the Blessed Virgin to take her under her protection, so that she may obtain from God the blessing that this little child may not die without having received holy Baptism. If a mother truly had the religious spirit, she would say to herself: “Ah! If I could only be sure of seeing this little child becoming a saint, of seeing him for all eternity by my side, singing the praises of God! What a joy that would be for me!”

But no, my dear brethren, that is not the thought which occupies the mind of an expectant mother. She will experience, rather, a devouring resentment on beholding herself in this state and perhaps the thought of even destroying the fruit of her womb will come to her. Oh, dear God! Can the heart of a Christian mother conceive such a crime? Yet we shall see some of them who unashamedly will have entertained such homicidal thoughts!

2. I tell you that an expectant mother who wishes to preserve her child for Heaven should avoid two things. The first is carrying loads which are too heavy and lifting her arms to take something; this could be injurious to her poor child and cause its death. The second thing to be avoided is the taking of remedies which could be too harsh on her child or which could heat her blood to an extent which could be fatal to it. Husbands should overlook a great many things which they would not put up with at any other time. If they will not do this for the sake of the mother, let them do it for the sake of the little child. For perhaps the child might lose the grace of Holy Baptism, which would be the greatest evil of all!

3. As soon as a mother sees her confinement approaching, she should go to Confession—and for many reasons. The first is that many women die during their confinements, and if she should have the misfortune to be in a state of sin, she would be damned. The second is that being in a state of grace, all the sufferings and the pains which she will endure will gain merit for Heaven. The third is that God will not fail to give her all the blessings which she will desire for her child. A mother at her confinement should preserve modesty as far as is possible in her state and never lose sight of the fact that she is in the presence of God and in the company of her Guardian Angel. She should never eat meat on the forbidden days without permission, a practice which would draw down punishment upon herself and her child.

4. A child should never be left longer than twenty-four hours without being baptised.

THE DUTIES OF THE MOTHER

You should never have your children sleeping with you from the time they are two years old. If you do, you are committing a sin. The Church did not make this law without reason. You are bound to observe it.

But, you will say to me, sometimes it is very cold or we are very tired. All that, my dear brethren, is not a reason which could excuse you in the eyes of God. Besides, when you married, you knew quite well that you would be obliged to fulfil certain responsibilities and obligations which are attached to the married state.

Still, my dear brethren, there are fathers and mothers who are so little instructed in their religion or who are so indifferent to their duties that they will have sleeping with them children from fifteen to eighteen years of age, and often brothers and sisters together. Dear Lord! These poor fathers and mothers are in a terrible state of ignorance! But, you will say, we have no bed. You have no bed? But it would be better to let them sleep on a chair or in a neighbour's house. Dear Lord! The parents and children who damn themselves! But I will return to my subject and repeat to you that all the time that you allow your children to sleep with you after they have reached two years of age, you are offending God. How many mothers are there who have found their children smothered in the morning! How many mothers are present to whom this calamity has happened! And even if the good God has preserved you from it, you are no less guilty than if, every time your children slept with you, you found them smothered in the morning. You do not wish to agree with this, that is to say, you do not wish to correct it. We will wait until the Judgment, and you will be obliged to recognise what you do not wish to recognise today. There are mothers who have so little religion or, if you like, are so ignorant that if they want to show off their baby to some neighbouring mothers, they will show it to them naked. Others, when they are putting on diapers, will leave the babies, for a long period of time, uncovered

before everyone. Now even if there is no one present at all, you should not do this. Should you not respect the presence of their Guardian Angels? It is the same thing when you are feeding them. Should any Christian mother allow her breasts to remain exposed? And even if they are covered, should she not turn aside to some place where there is no one else? Then there are others who, under the pretext of being foster-nurses, are continually only half-covered. This is very disgusting. It is enough to make even the pagans blush. People are compelled to avoid their company in order not to expose themselves to evil thoughts.

But, you will say to me, even if everyone is around, we must feed our children and change their diapers when they cry! And I shall tell you that when they cry, you ought to do everything you possibly can to quieten them but that it is a far better thing to let them cry a little than to offend God. Alas! How many mothers are the cause of evil glances, of bad thoughts, of immodest touches! Tell me, are these the Christian mothers who should be so reserved? Oh, dear God! What judgment should they expect? Others are so cruel that they let their children run around for the whole morning, during the summer, only half-dressed. Tell me, unhappy people, would it not be better for you to take your places among the savage beasts? Where is your religion, then, and your anxiety to do your duty? Alas! As far as religion is concerned, you have none. As for your duties, have you ever known what they were? That you have not, you give proof every day. Ah, poor children, how unfortunate you are to belong to such parents!

THE DUTIES OF PARENTS

I warned you that you should be sure to keep a watchful eye over your children when you send them out to the fields, for out there, far away from you, they can give themselves over to whatever the Devil may put into their minds. What if I dared to tell you that they carry on with all sorts of ugly and immodest practices, that they pass most of the day in all sorts of abominable ways? I know very well that the majority of them do not know the evil which they do—but wait until they do acquire that knowledge. At that moment the Devil will not fail to remind them of what they have done in order to make them commit that sin or others. Do you know, my dear brethren, what your negligence or your ignorance produces?

Look at it, then, and keep it in mind. A large number of the children that you send out to the fields make their First Holy Communion sacrilegiously. They have contracted shameful habits, and either they dare not confess them or they do not give them up. Later, if a priest who does not wish to damn them refuses them absolution, people will reproach him and say: “That’s because it’s my child...”

Go away, you wretched sinners, and watch a little more carefully over your children and they will not be refused. Yes, indeed, I am telling you that the great majority of your children began their bad ways and earned their later rejection during the time when they went out to the fields.

YOU WILL ANSWER FOR THEIR SOULS

But, you will tell me, we cannot be always following them around. We have other things to do.

As to that, my dear brethren, I will say nothing. All I know is that you will answer for their souls as much as for your own.

But we do all we can.

I do not know whether you do all you can, but this much I do know: if your children incur damnation at home with you, you, too, will be damned. That much I know, and nothing else.

You may go on saying “No” to that, saying that I go too far.

You will agree with it if you have not entirely lost your faith. That alone should suffice to cast you into a state of despair from which you could not emerge. But I know well that you will not take another step to fulfil any better your duties to your children. You are not at all disturbed, and you are almost right, for you will have plenty of time to torment yourselves during all eternity. We will pass on.

TO THEIR SHAME IT MUST BE SAID

You should never put your maidservants or your daughters to sleep in quarters to which the men will be going in the morning looking for food. This is something which, to the shame of fathers and mothers, must be said. These

unfortunate children, or servants, are confused and embarrassed getting up and dressing in front of people who have no more religion than if they had never heard anyone speak of the one true God. Often, even, the beds for these unfortunate people have no curtains around them.

But, you will say to me, if we had to do all the things you say, there would be an awful lot of work to do.

My friend, it is work which you must do, and if you do not do it, you will be punished on account of it: see....

I know very well that you will do nothing, or practically nothing, in respect of what I have just been teaching you. But no matter. I will always continue to tell you what you ought to do. Then all the wrongdoing will be yours and not mine....

When God comes to judge you, you will not be able to say that you did not know what you should have done....

I shall remind you of what I am telling you today.

GETTING TO KNOW THE RIGHT PEOPLE

You talk to them of the world. a mother will begin to tell her daughter that such and such a girl has married such and such a man, that she has done very well for herself, that the daughter ought now to see to it that she has the same good fortune. This type of mother has nothing in her head except her daughter—that is to say, she will do everything in her power to show her off to the eyes of the neighbours. She will deck her out in vanities, even perhaps to the extent of running herself into debt. She will teach her daughter to show herself to the best advantage while walking, telling her that she walks with such a slouch that no one would know what she is like.

Are you surprised that there are mothers who are so blind? Alas! The number of these poor blind mothers who seek the loss of their daughters is very high.

You will see them then in the morning when their daughters are going out, and they are more concerned with seeing that their daughters' headgear is on straight, that their faces and hands are attractive and clean, than with asking them if they turned their hearts to God, if they have said their prayers and made their morning offering. Of all that, they say nothing at all. Then they will tell their daughters that they should not appear shy or awkward, that they should be charming to everyone, that they ought to be thinking about getting to know the right people in order to get themselves settled in life. How many mothers will you hear saying to their daughters: "If you are nice and pleasant now, or if you make a success of this or that, I will let you go to the fair at Montmerle or to the vogue." In other words, if you make a success of this or that, as I wish, I will drag you into Hell.

Oh, dear Lord! Is this really the language of Christian parents, who should pray day and night for their little children?

There is something which is even sadder than this, and that is the case of those daughters who are not at all interested in going out and about. The parents keep at them, entreating and encouraging them, saying: "You are always staying in. You will never get yourself settled in life. You will let no one tell you anything about the world."

You would like your daughter to get to know people, my dear mother? Do not worry too much—she will get to know plenty of them without your having to upset yourself! Just wait a little while and you will see how well she will get to know them....

You pushed her into it first of all, but it will not be you who will draw her back. You will weep, maybe, but what good will your tears do? None at all....

YOU NO LONGER CONTROL THEM

Every day you are complaining about your children, are you not? Your complaint is that you can no longer control them? That is very true. You have perhaps forgotten the day that you said to your son or your daughter: "If you want to go to the fair at Montmerle, or even to the vogue at the cabaret, you can go there. But you must come back early."

Your daughter told you that it would be just as you wished.

"Go along so; you never go out. You should have some moments of pleasure." You will not say: "No!" Later on, you will have no need, either, to urge or even to give her permission to go. Then you will be in a terrible state because she has gone without telling you. Look back, my dear mother, and you will recall that you gave her the permission

once which was for all time.... You wanted her to get to know the right people so that she could get married and settle down. In fact, as the result of gadding about, she will get to know many people....

Is not this the way, my dear mother? "Let the Pastor talk away, go along just the same, be good, come back at an early hour, and all will be well." This is very good, my dear mother, but listen: One day I found myself walking along near where a big fire was burning. I took a handful of very dry straw and I threw it into the fire, telling it not to burn. Those who watched what I was doing told me, as they laughed at me, "You do well to tell it not to burn. Nothing will stop it from burning."

"But how will that be," I answered, "when I told it not to?" What do you think of that, my dear mother? Do you recognise yourself? Is not that exactly what you are doing?

Tell me, my dear mother, if you have any sentiments of religion and of affection for your children, should you not be doing everything you possibly can to help them to avoid the evil that you did yourself when you were the same age as your own daughter? Let us put it a bit more bluntly. You are not sufficiently content with being unhappy yourself, but do you want your children to be unhappy, too? And you, my daughter, you are unhappy in your own home? I am very distressed about that, I am very troubled by it, but I am less surprised than if you said you were happy, with all the pressure that is brought to bear upon you to get married.

Yes, my dear brethren, corruption among the young people today has grown to such a high degree that it would be almost as impossible to find among them those who worthily receive this Sacrament as it would be impossible to see a damned soul ascending to Heaven.

But, you will tell me, there are still some among them.

Alas, my friends, where are they?

Ah, yes, fathers and mothers see no harm in leaving a girl with a young man for three or four hours in the evening, or even when they are out at Vespers. But, you will say, they are very good.

Yes, without any doubt, they are very good. Charity urges us to believe that. But tell me this, my dear mother, were you so very good when you were in the same circumstances as your own daughter?

Alas, it would seem today that if a young man or a young girl wish to settle down, it must follow that they abandon God.

.... No, we will not go into details; we will come back to that some other time....

What I have said to you today amounts to only a glance at the subject. Come back on Sunday, fathers and mothers, leave your children to mind the house, and I will go further—without being able to get you to know half the significance of what I am saying! Alas, what about you, you poor children! Being your spiritual father, I give you this advice: When you see your parents, who miss religious services, who work on Sundays, who eat meat on the forbidden days, who do not go to the Sacraments any more, who do not improve their minds on religious matters—do the very opposite before them, so that your good example may save them, and if you are wise and good enough to do this, you will have gained everything. That is what I most desire for you.

HE WILL HELP US

Yes, my dear brethren, in everything that we see, in everything that we hear, in all we say and do, we are conscious of the fact that we are drawn towards evil. If we are at table, there is sensuality, and gluttony, and intemperance. If we take a few moments of recreation, there are the dangers of flightiness and idle chatter. If we are at work, most of the time it is self-interest, or avarice, or envy which influences us—or even vanity. When we pray, there is negligence, distraction, distaste, and boredom. If we are in pain or any trouble, there are complaints and murmurings. When we are doing well and are prosperous, pride, self-love, and contempt for our neighbour take hold of us. Our hearts swell with pride when we are praised. Wrongs inflame us into rages. There you see my dear brethren, the thing which made the greatest of the saints tremble. This was what made so many of them retire into the desert to live solitary lives; this was the source of so many tears, of so many prayers, of so many penances. It is true that the saints who were hidden away in the forests were not exempt from temptations, but they were far removed from so much bad example as that which surrounds us continually and which is the cause of so many souls being lost.

But, my dear brethren, we see from their lives that they watched, they prayed, and they were in dread unceasingly, while we, poor, blind sinners, are quite placid in the midst of so many dangers which could lose us our souls! Alas, my dear brethren, some of us do not even know what it is to be tempted because we hardly ever, or very rarely, resist. Which one of us can expect to escape from all these dangers? Which one of us will be saved? Anyone who wanted to reflect upon all these things could hardly go on living, so greatly terrified would he be! However, my dear brethren, what ought to console and reassure us is that we have to deal with a good Father Who will never allow our struggles to be greater than our strength, and every time we have recourse to Him, He will help us to fight and to conquer.

WE MUST EXPECT TEMPTATION

It is most unfortunate for ourselves if we do not know that we are tempted in almost all our actions, at one time by pride, by vanity, by the good opinion which we think people should have of us, at another by jealousy, by hatred and by revenge. At other times, the Devil comes to us with the foulest and most impure images. You see that even in our prayers he distracts us and turns our minds this way and that. It seems indeed that we are in a state since we are in the holy presence of God [sentence incomplete - Trans.]. And even more, since the time of Adam, you will not find a saint who has not been tempted—some in one way, some in another—and the greatest saints are those who have been tempted the most. If Our Lord was tempted, it was in order to show us that we must be also. It follows, therefore, that we must expect temptation. If you ask me what is the cause of our temptations, I shall tell you that it is the beauty and the great worth and importance of our souls which the Devil values and which he loves so much that he would consent to suffer two Hells, if necessary, if by so doing he could drag our souls into Hell. We should never cease to keep a watch on ourselves, lest the Devil might deceive us at the moment when we are least expecting it. St. Francis tells us that one day God allowed him to see the way in which the Devil tempted his religious, especially in matters of purity. He allowed him to see a band of devils who did nothing but shoot their arrows against his religious. Some returned violently against the devils who had discharged them.

They then fled, shrieking hideous yells of rage. Some of the arrows glanced off those they were intended for and dropped at their feet without doing any harm. Others pierced just as far as the tip of the arrow and finally penetrated, bit by bit.

If we wish to hunt these temptations away, we must, as St. Anthony tells us, make use of the same weapons. When we are tempted by pride, we must immediately humble and abase ourselves before God. If we are tempted against the holy virtue of purity, we must try to mortify our bodies and all our senses and to be ever more vigilant of ourselves. If our temptation consists in a distaste for prayers, we must say even more prayers, with greater attention, and the more the Devil prompts us to give them up, the more we must increase their number.

The temptations we must fear most are those of which we are not conscious. St. Gregory tells us that there was a religious who for long had been a good member of his community. Then he developed a very strong desire to leave the monastery and to return to the world, saying that God did not wish him to be in that monastery. His saintly superior told him: “My friend, it is the Devil who is angry because you may be able to save your soul. Fight against him.” But no, the other continued to believe that it was as he claimed. St. Gregory gave him permission to leave. But when he was leaving the monastery, the latter went on his knees to ask God to let this poor religious know that it was the Devil who wanted to make him lose his soul. The religious had scarcely put his foot over the threshold of the door to leave when he saw an enormous dragon, which attacked him.

“Oh, brothers,” he cried out, “come to my aid! Look at the dragon which will devour me!”

And indeed, the brethren who came running when they heard the noise found this poor monk stretched out on the ground, half-dead. They carried him back into the monastery, and he realised that truly it was the Devil who wanted to tempt him and who was bursting with rage because the superior had prayed for him and so had prevented the Devil from getting him. Alas, my dear brethren, how greatly we should fear, lest we do not recognise our temptations! And we shall never recognise them if we do not ask God to allow us to do so.
