

SERMON FOR THE EIGHTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

BY

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Qui Spiritu Dei aguntur hi filii Dei sunt.

For whosoever are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God.
—Romans 8, 14.



ALL works that have been accomplished so far, not only by men, but by all creation, all that will be accomplished until the end of the world, however great and beautiful, are nothing compared with the smallest action of God's grace in a perfect soul, nothing compared with what such a one can do under the impulse and movement of the Holy Spirit. Indeed, just as much as Almighty God surpasses all creatures, just so much are his works infinitely above all deeds, methods, theories, inventions that could be imagined by all men put together.

Quite often the Holy Ghost, coming down into a soul, instructs it himself, encourages it, exhorts it, moves and impels it from within; quite often he enlightens it and conducts it exteriorly by the doctors of the Church. He presses it from all sides, as if to say: 'Ah, my friend, if only you would consent to deliver yourself, to abandon yourself into my hands, if you sincerely desired to follow me, I would lead you into the very way of truth and there I could act upon thee and thou also couldst act upon me!' But alas, my dear children, the trouble is that hardly anyone today is willing to follow this wise and good Counsellor and give heed to his warnings. Instead of that, each one follows his personal inspirations, trusts to his own ideas, holds to his own way of life and clings to the blind workings of his senses, his judgment and his own wisdom, all of which hinders the loving action and fruitful operation of the Holy Spirit.

When a man is embroiled in all kinds of vice, how can he hear the voice or the word of the Holy Spirit? how could he understand it? He does not even leave the Holy Ghost room to act. One truth, however, must be borne in mind: that the best way to hear the voice of the Holy Spirit is to keep silence oneself, to have peace around one and to listen. For God to speak, all else must be quiet. For God to act in his divine and special way upon the soul, that soul must make room for him, that soul must be passive. These

two simultaneous workings in one subject are incompatible. Man must be passive where God is active.

Beware, all the same, of interpreting this too literally, as if I mean that strong, virile, inexperienced and above all young people should not bestir themselves to action. On the contrary, it is imperative that they should employ themselves, interiorly and exteriorly, in sensible work, in good deeds, in all the established customs, especially in whatever obedience has laid upon them. I speak chiefly of those who already have some experience of supernatural ways, of those who are seeking the perfection of the favoured children of God. Now, the principles that guide such as these are very different from the rules followed by beginners.

If we look out upon the world now, what do we see? An immense majority of men who are enemies of God. Of the rest, a few serve God under restraint; they have to be coerced, and the little good they do is accomplished, not from love or devotion, but from fear. . .

On the other hand, the well-beloved children of God of whom St Paul speaks are those who are moved by the Spirit of God. Now, how can this be? St Augustine will explain it to us: 'The Holy Ghost', he says, 'works in man in two ways. Firstly, when God disposes, directs and moves him bit by bit, patiently exhorting him, attracting him, insensibly drawing him towards a well-ordered and virtuous life. God employs this method with all who attend to him and who give him room to act by obeying his counsels. Secondly, God's method with his true children is to draw and attract them to him suddenly, raising them to a higher plane, above all ordinary ways, above their own strength, their own deeds or merits, without any intermediary.' These are the chosen children of God.

But alas! there are many who have not the courage to yield up themselves, to abandon themselves to this divine operation and to lean upon it; they prefer to trust to their own ideas in which they put overmuch confidence. We can only compare them with people who, having to convey precious treasure across an immense ocean, would go out of their way, lose themselves in darkness and storms, and after unheard-of efforts see their goods spoilt with seawater and covered with rust. Supposing in their distress a serious and trustworthy man should come and say to them: 'Turn the vessel, follow me', promising to lead them by a bright and easy route, filled with sunshine, sweet with perfumed air, in perfect calm and tranquillity, where the brightness and the heat of the day would not only draw all dampness out of the treasure but would restore all its former beauty by destroying the rust—I am supposing that someone comes offering to better their conditions in every way.

Obviously these merchants would listen gratefully and follow him without delay, would they not? It is the same with us. We are carrying a most precious vessel through the stormy sea of this world. The vessel that carries us is our our sensuality or the sensitive part of our nature. Now, on this vessel, alas! we go astray, towards exterior things which have attracted us, which we have chosen as our aim and upon which we have built up our work, our methods and all our practices; we are always occupied with our own thoughts, our own ideas, our own will, and so we get deeper and deeper into obscurity, into thick and unwholesome clouds—I mean mental blindness and ignorance of ourselves. The enemy of all good, the devil, sprinkles upon our treasure, to tarnish it, corrosive drops. I call these sprinklings of the devils the vain complacency with which we cling to our good works and our habits, enjoying the ownership of them; I call these drops pride, self-will, self-esteem, rebellion, self-pity, and many other vices which are all indeed infected drops with which the devil, alas! soils and stains our beautiful treasure.

Some, when they see these stains upon themselves, seek at once to remove them by confession; but by going to and fro and only seeking an exterior remedy, they do nothing but plunge themselves into a darker cloud. It would suffice to recollect themselves interiorly, to recognise their weakness and acknowledge it before God, whilst waiting for a more propitious moment for sacramental confession according to the rules established by the Church.

Now, whilst we have got ourselves into this fog the Holy Spirit speaks to us interiorly and says: 'Ah, my dear children, did you but trust yourselves to me, if only you would be willing to follow me, I would lead you back again and guide you into the right way'. And who is there, I ask you, who would refuse to have faith in such a faithful Counsellor? who would refuse to follow him? Oh, God grant that we might be wise enough and inspired enough to follow the Holy Spirit and make an effort to heed his warnings, his counsels, his direction, giving up ourselves and our own ideas! How infinitely better it would be for us, but, alas! miserable as we are, we do nothing of the sort! We cling as ever to our own plans, our own methods, our sensual ways, our exterior attractions, our self-will and our own judgment.

However, my dear children, to make my meaning clearer, know that we should have some good plans of our own. We should cling interiorly to some exercises and devout customs, certainly, but let us do it all without a spirit of ownership, only holding to it as to the will of God, submitting with absolute abandonment to his working. Let us beware of destroying his work by a presumptuous and exag-

gerated esteem of our own deeds, by an attachment to our intellectual opinions or to our own natural intelligence. For all who act thus may be compared with an orchard planted all over with magnificent trees, whose fruits look beautiful to the eye but are worm-eaten and fall before attaining maturity. If in this orchard there were still other trees with perfumed and precious blossoms, it will not be long before they are devoured and destroyed by the maggots that fell from the fruit. Assuredly, as you all know, these fruits, as long as you do not examine them too closely or take hold of them, seem as beautiful as those that are sound. But what are you driving at? you will ask me. At this: that each of you must take care to keep your heart absolutely pure, otherwise it will not be very pleasing to God. However, to resume our comparison of the fruit: either I am much mistaken, or you will hardly find two in the whole orchard that are intact and healthy untouched by worms, and whilst the outside looks so beautiful, inside you will find a blemish.

And so it is, yes, so it is that one meets with many admirable good works and sublime methods of life, wonderful words and deeds, and which, nevertheless, inside at the core are mined and devoured by worms or which at least are liable to become tainted, whether it is a question of active or contemplative life, of rejoicing or contemplation, even in cases of ecstasy or rapture to the third heaven. Remember what was said of St Paul and of the angel of Satan sent to buffet him, lest the greatness of the revelations should nurture pride in him. (2 Cor. 12.) If you already had the gift of prophecy, if you worked miracles and prodigies, if you healed the sick, had the discernment of spirits, did you know all mysteries, all your manners and ways of life could easily become corrupted and worm-eaten if each one of you did not observe great vigilance and stand upon your guard.

For instance, let us speak of a well-known daily practice. Many give alms or do some exterior good deeds or showy works of charity; they distribute largesse. If it all passed unnoticed and was known to God alone, they could hardly endure it; they would not be happy. . . . Such indeed is the corrupt state of many that they wish to be seen and known in all that they do and to get something out of it for themselves. All actions done with these sentiments are worm-eaten, were they sufficiently numerous to fill the whole world.

And this is not merely my own doctrine: it is above all the teaching of the Truth himself who affirms it in many places and who in particular bears witness to it in St Matthew: 'And when you fast be not as the hypocrites, sad. For they disfigure their faces,

that they may appear unto men to fast. Amen, I say to you, they have received their reward. But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thy head, and wash thy face; that thou appear not to men to fast, but to thy Father who is in secret. And thy Father who seeth in secret will repay thee'. (Matt. 6.) These words do not only apply to fasting but to all other practices. A little higher up, indeed, in the same Gospel, our Lord thus expresses himself: 'Take heed that you do not your justice before men, to be seen by them: otherwise, you shall not have reward of your Father who is in heaven. Therefore when thou dost an alms-deed, sound not a trumpet before thee' (that is what you do when you put your signature to your alms), 'as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be honoured by men: Amen, I say to you that they have received their reward. And when thou dost alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doth. That thy alms may be in secret: and thy Father who seeth in secret will repay thee'.

Well, then, my dear children, receive these words not as coming from me but from the Truth, and see at the same time if you gather any fruit from God for those works that have not been done solely for him. If they have truly availed you nothing it is because they are, as I have told you, rotten at the core.

Now, if you like, I will teach you four things which, if you put them into practice, will prevent your good works from being attacked by worms.

(1) First of all, make very little of your works; let them be carried out interiorly and exteriorly as if there was nothing to be gained by them, desiring no reward but God; do them with this sole intention and this only love. Are they pleasing to God and dear to him? Then rejoice. If not, be assured that you have toiled in vain because, in doing them, you had not in view the glory of God and his love.

(2) The second point consists in having a heart that is infinitely humble and obedient, and that not only towards God but towards all men, for the least of all as well as for the greatest.

We read of St Thomas Aquinas that one day, when he was at the convent at Bologna and walking in the cloisters, as was his habit, all wrapt in contemplation, a certain brother of another convent who did not know him accosted the holy Doctor (he had previously got leave from the Prior to take the first he should meet with him, to do some shopping in the town): 'My good brother', said he, coming up to St Thomas, 'the Prior has ordered you to come with me'. St Thomas immediately bowed and followed him; also, as he could not walk so quickly as his companion and was frequently rebuked for it, he humbly excused himself. It was not

until later that the brother, enlightened by his companions, discovered with whom he had been dealing and he asked St Thomas's pardon.

We should all, after the example of this great man, give way humbly to our brethren. We should also convince ourselves that the judgment of others is always better than our own, and instead of disputing yield humbly to what they tell us.

(3) The third advice I would give you is to be deeply humble, always aware of our nothingness, burying ourselves in that as in the only thing we possess of our own. It follows that each one should hold his own works and deeds, even himself, in so far as these things are ours at all, as of no value and even bad.

A holy friar of our Order, through whom God had worked wonders and real miracles because of his merits, was next to me one day in choir, and he said this to me from the depths of his heart; 'I assure you that I am the greatest and most vile sinner on the face of the earth. Everyone should be convinced of this and sincerely acknowledge it, for if our Lord had granted to the greatest criminal all the gifts that he has given to me, he would have become a great saint.'

Those who truly keep themselves in this deep humility would be incapable of in any way judging others and putting a bad construction upon their actions.

(4) My fourth counsel is that you always seek out lowly work for preference, fearing the secret judgments of God, not however as those who are discouraged but like a friend whose constant thought is to avoid displeasing his friend.

These four recommendations come from St Bernard. I am anxious to repeat them to you, for if you do not observe them, whatever may be the number of your deeds in other ways, were you to do all that the whole world could do, all of it would be tainted with corruption.

And now let us look at the beautiful trees full of good fruit in the garden of the Church; these are all humble men, for such alone can bear sound fruit. Unfortunately there are others who give only blemished fruit. Their colour is attractive, doubtless—why, they sometimes appear better than the whole and healthy fruits as long as they remain hanging on the tree under a calm and serene sky; but let the storm come and the winds blow: immediately they will fall and all can see that inside they were devoured by maggots and they are good for nothing. Nay, more, the worms that filled them will spread to all the good trees of the orchard to invade and infect them. These trees laden with rotten fruit are men filled with self-will, rebellious, self-opinionated, those who follow their own bent,

those who rely upon their labours, their intelligence, their apparent sanctity, indeed upon all their great works. They have no confidence but in themselves and their deeds; they do more of these than the truly upright do; but what they cling to most in their ideas, in their customs, in their way of life, is not so much the precept of the Church as their own opinion; their own judgment has made them choose and accomplish all these things. Whilst all goes calmly these men are at peace; while the sun shines and illumines their conduct all is well, their works have a greater appearance of sanctity and splendour than those of truly holy souls. But come the storms of severe temptations, such as the attacks against faith that crop up in our days—make no mistake about it, as soon as trials come of any kind, immediately they fall miserably. Why? Because their heart is worm-eaten and corrupt so that they are good for nothing. The worms with which they are filled come out from them and spoil the healthy grass; that is, poor, ignorant and simple folk whom they pervert and infect with their unsound doctrine and false liberty. Then, at their last hour, with what terrible misery, what distress, with what anguish will they find themselves encompassed when they discover that in their souls they harbour not God essentially but only something artificial! Even then, if some among them chance to be saved, they can consider themselves lucky. For, indeed, all are walking, even though secretly, on that broad way, following their natural impulses, movements, affections and desires. They are far from climbing the straight path and sinking themselves in true resignation; they have never desired to renounce themselves entirely and turn their backs on nature. Doubtless, at times, they do seem to take a difficult or straight road, but the next minute they are back on the broad way; they return to nature.

But we have said enough of these corrupt men; our digression has been too lengthy; let us return to our subject.

As I began by telling you, those are the cherished children of God who are led by the Spirit of God. They are those whose constant study and application is not only to know the will, inspirations and warnings of the Holy Spirit, but to follow them and carry them out. Now, often to these souls a way of dryness and of infinite length opens itself and they are obliged to take it in peril of their lives. If they do so courageously and with joy, trusting and abandoning themselves to the Holy Ghost, there is no knowing how much fruit they may gather. If only they could enter into themselves to see there the workings of the Holy Spirit, what they would discover would be so marvellous that their senses and their intelligence would be confounded. . . . As I have said elsewhere, with God

nothing is lost, nothing is small; but it must be God's work and not man's. We do not doubt that God is infinitely greater, more perfect than all creatures. Consequently his action also infinitely surpasses all those of creatures. Those who get this far, lose hold, in a way, exteriorly of all other work, for interiorly they always have as much as and more than they can get done. It is here that perfect peace and security are to be found. But who could persuade everyone of this? Even those who exhaust their brains (with subtle reasoning) cannot understand it. Be well convinced of this, my dear children: 'Every plant which my heavenly Father hath not planted shall be rooted up'. (Matt. 15, 13.)

Tell me, with what love will not Almighty God seek the soul who leaves him a clear stage so that he can accomplish there his incomparably and infinitely sweet work, so that he himself can enjoy himself in that soul! This love is so great, so excellent, that it is beyond the understanding of men and angels: it is the very love that he bears his only Son. Yes, this way in which the soul is led by the Spirit of God is unfathomable.

Formerly, when St Denis's disciples expressed astonishment that their colleague Timothy made more progress in virtue than they were making themselves, although their good works were more numerous than his, the saint answered: 'Timothy is a man who allows God to act—who *suffers* God'.

But all this is done with a lively faith and far surpasses all the exterior works that the whole world could accomplish. At this stage or in this method nothing is so necessary for the soul as to plunge itself into the depths of its own nothingness, in such a way as to arrogate nothing to oneself, to lay claim to nothing of this divine work, leaving to God all that is God's, and keeping only what is one's own nothingness and self-contempt. For if he takes to himself anything of this divine operation, he exposes himself to the most dreadful ruin imaginable.

In order, then, to keep in our own place in these works of God, let us betake ourselves to him, for he alone, the almighty and glorious God, can grant us this grace. To him be honour and glory for ever. Amen.