

A priest who had much disdain for the Cure of the little backwater town of Ars, France, once asked him what he had to do in order to be saved. St. John Vianney simply said to him in Latin, *Declina a malo et fac bonum* – decline from evil and do the good. But the look he gave to the priest as he said it let the priest know that St. John could read his soul. And the priest underwent a profound conversion.

The last sermon introduced some serious developments in the Church which might turn out to be rather inconsequential, though I doubt it, but I said it was better to prepare for the worst. Now how do we do that? The first and most important way is to decline from evil and do the good. To decline, to move away from evil; that is the will of God. Because the worst for us in the next life would be damnation, and that catastrophe happens when one does not decline from evil and do the good.

Take the virtue of temperance, which regulates our desires to eat, drink and procreate. If a man engages in gluttony – that eating well beyond what nourishment for the body requires – then the body will begin to show it. But some souls, instead of declining from the gluttony, make room for it. And if it goes on long enough, they make peace with it and become comfortable with it, accepting its consequences.

The same goes for drinking. The person that drinks and discovers that bitter quarrels and arguments follow after the drinking has a choice to either make issue with and fight the intemperance or make room for it. And if this goes on for long enough they will make room in their souls with drunkenness, and then make peace with the alcohol and accept the consequences, from damaged marriages and families to driving while drunk and putting all in their path at risk for their very lives.

And the same goes for the natural desire for procreation. Is there anything as contradictory to that desire as the use of pornography? Is there anything more opposed to love than pornography? The man who does not seek to decline from it, but makes room for it will make peace with it and accept its consequences.

And are not these instances the very definition of hell? For hell is a place for people who made peace with and then became comfortable with evil. So that is the first thing we must do to prepare for the worst. We must make issue with evil, and not let it have any place in our lives.

This may come as a surprise to you, if you think that to defend the traditional Mass from those who seek its demise is to sign petitions, or write letters and that sort of thing. Now those have their place, and I hope to get to that later. But first, we need to get it into our minds that radical separation from sin and union with God is the number one thing we need to accomplish if we wish to have the Rite of St. Gregory.

I can't emphasize this enough. Consider for a moment the situation the nuns in a particular convent in southern France once faced during the Franco-Prussian War. Napoleon III had surrendered to the Prussians, though France was still carrying on the fight. The convent chapel had turned into a field hospital for the retreating wounded soldiers. The nuns had gone into large room for their quarters, and their normal rooms plus the hallways were filled with wounded soldiers. 25 novices were sent south for protection, and the postulants were sent home to their families. The danger to the consecrated virgins from drunken victorious Prussian soldiers was great. Artillery was placed on the inner terrace of the motherhouse and in the gardens of the novitiate. And on the night of October 24, 1870, all were amazed at the strange display in the sky. The southern French had no idea what it was (it was what we call the Northern Lights or an aurora borealis), and this added to the great fear felt by all. Yet one of the nuns was supremely calm and even cheerful. A captain said, "The Prussians are near the gates. Don't they inspire you with terror?" She said, "No." "So there is nothing to fear then?" "I fear only bad Catholics." The captain was surprised. "Do you fear nothing else?" "No, nothing." The nun was Sr. Bernadette Soubirous, the famous visionary of Lourdes, later canonized. And if that were not enough, Pope St. Pius V once said, "All the evils in this world are due to lukewarm Catholics."

These should give us pause. Catholics attending the traditional Mass can be quite lukewarm about temperance, lukewarm about wearing the chapel veil, lukewarm about fasting and abstinence, lukewarm about singing the sacred liturgy, lukewarm about learning and studying the Mass, and above all, lukewarm about charity. If we are serious about keeping and defending the Mass, then we ought to clean up our own houses first.

Dom Herbert van Zeller, an English Benedictine abbot put the problem this way.

Left to themselves for twenty minutes in a strange place with nothing to do, people's first thought is how to make themselves comfortable. The reason why consciences fail to operate is because their owners physically and mentally pamper themselves. Very few souls are found to lapse from the faith on account of their having seen an aspect of truth which appears more convincing than what is taught by the Church; people cease to practice their religion because they submit to the a-moral, a-Christian, a-disciplined atmosphere of the world and to their own crass laziness.

Conscience cannot stand up indefinitely to this willingness to submit. Spiritually, we are in a strange place while living in this life, and if we look round for a principle or a philosophy or a creed which will do no more than make us feel comfortable, then we shall not be entirely satisfied by the facilities offered us by the Church. Making people comfortable is not after all what the Church is for.

And besides, what is the worst that can happen? The worst is often the best. St. Augustine wrote in the Enchiridion that "God is so good that he would not permit evil in any way, unless He were powerful enough that from each evil He can draw some good." The worst is often the best for us.

Now I don't talk about myself very much in sermons, but in this series I'm going to make a bit of an exception, and I'll start by reminiscing briefly about an assignment I once had. It was an independent chapel that was in a state of schism. And I learned the hard way the truth of what St. Thomas Aquinas said about schism, namely, that the first virtue to go in schism is charity. I once asked the parishioners there, "Why are you so odious to one another?" The assignment was brutal. When the alarm clock went off, my gut would instantly turn, because I knew I would get a spiritual knife in it that day – I just didn't know how many times or when.

Well, things turned out alright. The chapel was reunited with Holy Mother Church, charity began to flow again. It was one of the best assignments I ever had. It forced me to learn how to forgive quickly, so that the sun would not go down on my anger.

The parishioners had a going-away dinner for me, which was a little awkward, since some of the people who had treated me like dirt were all for the dinner; but they wanted forgiveness and it was my job to give it. Then I heard that the bishop wanted to come. That made things extremely awkward, given that he had treated them far, far worse than they had treated me. But I said he should come and be allowed to speak. When he rose to speak, you could have cut the tension with a knife. But he said he was diagnosed with stomach cancer, and had eight months to live. He actually lived another six. He announced that the chapel would be fully reconciled, become a parish in the diocese, and retain all of tradition, granting all the requests the people there had asked. And then he apologized beautifully for what he had done, and for the next six months went around undoing as much as he could, the damage he had done. For those six months by the way, he was an excellent bishop.

When he finished, people clapped – a skeptical applause I would say. But as soon as he walked out of the room, there was silence while the audience pondered what just happened. And then a man (who was a real character) rose, lifted his glass in the air and said, "Here's to stomach cancer!"

Only a Catholic could make a toast like that. Because Catholics, who grasp the meaning of the Cross, know that often, on this side of the Judgment, the worst is often the best.