

THE CATHOLIC HOUR

McClafferty John J.  
The Church and  
ADT 9061

830944

# THE CHURCH AND DECENCY

BY

VERY REV. MSGR. JOHN J. McCLAFFERTY

Executive Secretary, National Legion of Decency, New York City

The fifth in a series of nine addresses on THE CHURCH IN ACTION, delivered in the Catholic Hour, broadcast by the National Broadcasting Company, in cooperation with the National Council of Catholic Men, on October 3, 1943.

National Council of Catholic Men  
Washington, D. C.

## THE CHURCH AND DECENCY

FRIENDS:

These days as we move toward the decision of blood we hear much, we read much, about decency. Radio, the press, and the film carry the words of statesmen and national figures who aver that decency should and must characterize the actions of nations in the post-war world—a decency stemming from justice and charity—a decency issuing from respect of human dignity and rights.

Decency is defined as propriety in conduct, speech, manners, or dress. That is decent which becomes, which befits, which is seemly and suitable. Becomes what, in these premises? Befits what? The dignity of man.

It is heartening that statesmen talk about decency in the affairs of nations, that they appear really to be interested in the furtherance of decency in human affairs. They and the people for whom they hold the trust are being sorely tried by the evils which indecencies have spawned upon the world. The Church has had, has, and will have until the Church Militant has gained the final Crown, a real true concern with decency in all the thoughts, words, actions, and affairs of men. The Church would have men decent in international dealings, decent in national affairs,

decent in civic, social, and economic relations, decent in family life, and decent in recreational and cultural pursuits. In fine, the Church would have man decent in all his relationships, would have man always and in all things live in accord with the high calling of his dignity and destiny.

The Church is interested in decency because the Church is interested in the moral law and in man.

The Church, institution of God founded by Christ, is solicitous for the eternal welfare and for the temporal welfare of man as that temporal weal really conduces to man's spiritual well-being.

The moral law is the pathway to man's eternal happiness and to his ordered and proper temporal welfare. The moral law perfects man and leads him to the ends which belong to his nature: self-preservation, propagation of his kind and the upbringing of offspring, pursuit and attainment of eternal truth and goodness in common with other men.

The Will of God for man is expressed in the moral law. "For this the will of God, your sanctification" (I *Thess.* 4:3). "God our Savior, who will have all men to be saved, and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (I *Tim.* 2:3-4).

The moral law is founded not upon any human social compact, not upon any shifting base of relativism, but upon a real order involving the relationship of man to God, to himself, and to his fellowman, a relationship and order manifested through man's reason and God's revelation.

The Church is interested in man. To man the Church extends the Truth and Goodness of God. To God the Church leads man.

Man, "this quintessence of dust," yet "how like an angel." Man, weighted with earth and flesh, yet winged with thought and spirit. Man, deprived by sin, ennobled by grace. Man, sometimes unhappily blind foolish *servitor* of Satan, yet free creature and glorious child of God. Man, compared in the words of the Psalmist to the senseless beasts and "become like to them". But, again in the words of David "Man is a little lower than the angels. Thou hast crowned him, O God, with glory and honor. Thou hast set him over all the works of Thy hands."

Bundle of contradictions and contrarieties, arena of strife wherein clash the forces of good and evil, yet master of his own fate and captain of his own soul. Look to the challenge of God to man: "I call heaven and earth to witness this day, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and

cursing. Choose therefore life that both thou and thy seed may live" (*Deut.* 30:19).

Man, puny against the power and expanse of the universe, yet special object of God's infinite love. God loved man enough to create him to His own Image: "Let us make man to our image and likeness" (*Gen.* 1:26). God loved man enough to redeem him after he had fallen: "God so loved the world, as to give his only begotten Son" (*John* 3:16). God loved man enough to sanctify him: "Know you not, that you are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you?" (*I Cor.* 3:16). God loved man enough to lift him to the level of a son in the Household of the Father: "Behold what manner of charity the Father has bestowed upon us, that we should be called, and should be the sons of God" (*I John* 3:1).

God loved man enough to identify Himself in marvelous manner with him: "As long as you did it to one of these my least brethren, you did it to me" (*Matt.* 25:40).

With dignity so sublime man is designed for destiny commensurate: "Come, ye blessed of my Father, possess you the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world" (*Matt.* 25:34).

The Church, interested in decency because interested in the moral law, in the dignity, welfare,

and destiny of man, has, within our times through the voices of Her Supreme Shepherds, the Vicars of Christ, asserted with force and clarity the dignity of man and that the moral law governs all human actions, activities, affairs and relations.

Benedict XV, of blessed memory, and Pius XII now gloriously reigning, have besought morality and decency in the affairs of nations.

Leo XIII and Pius XI, both of blessed memory, and Pius XII, have appealed for morality and decency in the social and economic orders. They have opposed anarchy, tyrannical collectivism, atheistic communism, and racism. They have upraised the exploitation of the worker. They have pleaded for the just distribution and control of private property and national resources, for a just family wage, for equitable relationships between labor and capital, and for the due observance of all human rights.

Pius XI in his encyclicals on Christian Marriage and on Christian Education assailed the evils that threaten the home and the mind of the child, and stated with vigor the Church's position relative to the nature and use of marriage and to the training of the young.

But, the realm of the international, the sphere of the social and the economic, the family hearth, do

not comprise the totality of human relations. There remains the area of cultural and recreational pursuits.

Over seven years ago Pius issued the encyclical on motion pictures. In this letter addressed to all the bishops of the world Pius XI commended the bishops of the United States for their leadership in organizing the Legion of Decency as an effort on the part of Catholics, Protestants, and Jews, and all high-minded persons, to recall the film industry to its great moral responsibility and thus discourage the production of motion pictures subversive of the moral order. The Holy Father asserted that to the cinema must be applied the "supreme rule which must direct and regulate even the highest art in order that it may not find itself in continual conflict with Christian morality or even simply with human morality based upon natural law." "The essential purpose of art," Pius continued, "is to assist in the perfecting of the moral personality which is man. For this reason it (art) must itself be moral."

Pius would have the film not only *not* serve the moral ruin of the soul, but become a valuable auxiliary of instruction. He would have the artistic and technical progress of the cinema ordered to the Glory of God, the salvation of souls, and



the extension of the Kingdom of God on earth.

He counselled "unceasing universal vigilance" against the evil film, and urged the bishops of the whole world to unite in this vigilance.

He displayed an unusual insight into and conversance with the unique nature, extent, and power of the film.

He stated that the motion picture has achieved "a position of universal importance among modern means of diversion," that "there exists today no means of influencing the masses more potent than the cinema."

He termed morally bad motion pictures occasions of sin, seducing young people along the ways of evil, showing life under false light, clouding ideals; destroying pure love, respect for marriage, and affection for the family; creating prejudices among individuals, and misunderstandings among nations, social classes, and races.

He observed that films morally good are capable of exercising a profoundly moral influence by arousing noble ideals of life, communicating valuable conceptions, imparting better knowledge of history, presenting truth and virtue under attractive forms, creating at least the flavor of understanding among nations, classes, and races, championing the cause of justice, giving new life to the claims of

virtue, and contributing positively to the genesis of a just social order in the world.

Thus Pius XI bespoke the interest of the Church in decency in motion picture entertainment, an interest born of the Church's interest in the moral law and in man. Thus did the Holy Father seek to recall to ways of decency and morality, a potent medium of culture and recreation. The medium, the light of the screen — a powerful light piercing the darkness of almost 17,000 theatres and touching approximately 85,000,000 persons weekly in the U. S. A.,—a penetrating light, reaching into souls, that can cast shadows across souls as well as screens, compounded of light, shadow, color, movement, sound and music — a persuasive light moving individuals to good or evil, moulding public opinion, shaping popular tastes, customs, and fancies, strengthening or weakening standards of morality.

In the encyclical on motion pictures Pius stated that "the Bishops of the United States are determined at all times and at all costs to safeguard the recreation of the people in whatever form that recreation may take." The Bishops in the words of Pius, "are under obligation to interest themselves in every form of decent and healthy recreation because they are responsible before God for the moral welfare

of their people even during their leisure. Their sacred calling constrains them to proclaim clearly and opening that unhealthy and impure entertainment destroys the moral fibre of the nation."

The Church, accordingly, has a proper and necessary interest in the recreation of her children. In modern industrial society where people labor under fatiguing and monotonous conditions, recreation in its manifold variety and expression has become a veritable necessity. "But," to quote the thought of Pius, this recreation "must be worthy of the rational nature of man and therefore morally healthy. It must be elevated to the rank of a positive factor for good, and must seek to arouse a noble sentiment." To the nation Pius uttered this challenging warning: "people who, in time of repose, give themselves to diversions which violate decency, honor or morality; to recreations which, especially to the young, constitute occasions for sin, are in grave danger of losing their greatness, even their national power."

The Bishops of the United States, determined at all times and at all costs to safeguard the recreation of their people in whatever form that recreation may take, confronted with a polluting deluge of indecent literature, organized in December, 1938, the National Organization for Decent Literature

as a dam against this putrid flood. The National Organization for Decent Literature periodically evaluates current publications in terms of decency, encourages newsdealers to cooperate in the crusade for decency in print, confers and counsels with the publishers and distributors of magazines.

The Archdiocese of New York, within the confine of which are produced the great majority of the plays of the legitimate stage, has for many years sponsored the Catholic Theatre Movement to provide moral guidance to theatregoers, and to advise with producers and playwrights who in their good will seek counsel.

The Church is interested in decency because it is interested in the moral law and in man. The Church is concerned that decency and morality characterize all human actions, activities, affairs, and relationships, including recreational and cultural pursuits. So the Church, interested in the dignity, the spiritual and temporal welfare of man, and in recreation enhancing that dignity and welfare, would have the cinema decent, the press decent, and the stage decent. What has been said with reference to film, press, and stage may also be said with reference to radio. The Church would likewise have the radio decent in both its auditory and visual phases.

Our present Holy Father, Pius XII, in his first encyclical, "Darkness over the Earth," cites the errors and evils which have proceeded from the poisoned well of the neglect and repudiation of religion and morality.

Unhappily and paradoxically, in many instances in the past and in some instances today, the light of the screen has contributed to the "Darkness over the Earth". In some instances footlights too have blackened, the ink of presses has

thickened, and the glow of radio's electronic tubes has deepened, the "Darkness over the Earth".

Our Divine Lord has promised that not even the gates of hell could or would prevail over His Church. Camera shutters, rising curtains, shuttling presses, radio waves, will then never prevail over the Church—the Church interested in decency, because interested in the moral law, in man and his total welfare.

# THE CATHOLIC HOUR

1930—Fourteenth Year—1943

The nationwide Catholic Hour was inaugurated on March 2, 1930, by the National Council of Catholic Men in cooperation with the National Broadcasting Company and its associated stations. Radio facilities are provided gratuitously by NBC and the stations associated with it; the program is arranged and produced by NCCM.

The Catholic Hour was begun on a network of 22 stations, and now carries its message of Catholic truth on each Sunday of the year (and Good Friday) through a number of stations varying from 90 to 107, situated in 40 states, the District of Columbia, and Hawaii. Consisting of an address mainly expository, by one or another of America's leading Catholic preachers, and of sacred music provided usually by a unit of the Paulist Choir, the Catholic Hour has distinguished itself as one of the most popular and extensive religious broadcasts in the world. A current average of 41,000 audience letters a month, about twenty per cent of which come from listeners of other faiths, gives some indication of its popularity and influence.

Our Sunday Visitor Press  
Huntington, Indiana

