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The Judgment of God and The Sense of Duty

by
William J. Kerby



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by

The Right Reverend Monsignor William J. Kerby,
Editor of The Ecclesiastical Review.

Two addresses delivered in the Catholic Hour, produced
by the National Council of Catholic Men, through
the courtesy of the National Broadcasting
company and its associated stations.

(On Sundays from August 18 to August 25, 1935)

- I. The Judgment of God.
- II. The Sense of Duty.

Second Edition 10,000



National Council of Catholic Men
Producer of the Catholic Hour
1312 Massachusetts Avenue,
Washington, D. C.

Printed and distributed by Our Sunday Visitor
Huntington, Indiana



OUR SUNDAY VISITOR LIBRARY
HUNTINGTON, INDIANA

IMPRIMATUR:

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Bishop of Fort Wayne.

THE JUDGMENT OF GOD

Address delivered on August 18, 1935

Every time that we recite the Apostles' Creed we record our belief that Christ will come to judge the living and the dead in General Judgment. Many texts in Holy Scripture affirm this. The Church has held it among its most constant traditions. This General Judgment will mark the close of the history of the race. Neither imagination nor experience offers any explanation of the mystery. We are unable to visualize it. The Fall of Man, the Incarnation as the divine instrument of his restoration, the unwearied patience of God with sin, the scope of Divine Revelation, the sacramental system, the authentic ministry of the Church, are so known to imagination and experience that the cessation of these and the completion of the work of God are beyond our understanding. The central truth around which these mysteries assemble is the moral responsibility of man. Free will is high privilege and heavy responsibility. God holds man accountable in the measure of his knowledge and strength for the working out of his eternal salvation. The General Judgment closes the time of probation, closes the history of the Incarnation. There will be then only the saved and the lost. The race was redeemed. The race is judged.

We are accustomed in Catholic life to refer to death as the Particular Judgment. As the General Judgment terminates the history of the Incarnation in the race, death as the Particular Judgment terminates the history of the Incarnation in in-

dividual life. Each life constitutes one chapter in the story of the Incarnation. As we come and go in daily life, as we work and play, as we save and spend, as we seek God and thankfully accept His discipline and guidance or we evade or defy God with blind determination or lazy indifference, the complete record of every life is seen by God and dealt with in His holy providence. Life is a term of probation and when death ends life it ends probation. As one is at the moment of death one will be forever—saved or lost.

For this reason death assumes a place of commanding importance among the solitudes of Christian life. The constant traditions of Catholic piety lead us to pray for a happy death, to be delivered from a sudden and unprovided death, to gain the inestimable blessing of final perseverance. The moment of death determines our destiny. Dying in friendship with Christ we enter into peace and happiness forever. Whether we go to Him in the glory of baptismal innocence, with spiritual loyalties unimpaired and vigorous; whether we go to Him clothed in penitential robes, seeing the glory of His mercy through our tears of repentance, the Incarnation triumphs in us, forever. Dying in mortal sin, unrepentant, with graces rejected, spiritual vision lost and mercy spurned, we enter into reprobation and suffering without recourse. Through the Incarnation Christ comes to each soul to redeem it. He suffered and died for each soul. The lost soul is a defeat of the Incarnation.

All of the logic of supernatural truth, all of the proprieties of our spiritual nature, all of the teaching of the Divine Master, declare to us that the

state of grace is the normal supernatural condition of the soul. One must live prepared to die, for the Particular Judgment associated with death determines spiritual fate forever. Friendship with Christ is the immediate condition of all Christian dignity, all success, all worth, all permitted power and sanctioned joy. Death is the divinely commissioned teacher of life. "In all thy works remember thy last end and thou shalt never sin".

There is yet another judgment of God which greatly concerns us. It is His judgment of us one by one at this moment, at any moment, at all moments currently through life. Whether we are in positions of power in industry, Church, or government, leading an army, or weary with exacting manual labor; whether we hold the happiness and dignity of thousands in our hands through industrial authority or are the victims of industrial tyranny; whether we listen to the thunders of applause for great achievement or make futile resistance to oppression and injustice—at every moment, in every situation, in power and weakness, in error and in truth, we are judged by God.

God's authority over life is complete, penetrating, and constant. His judgment of us is infallible and instantaneous. Its execution may be delayed while we live. In this sense we might say that life is the gift of His Providence that delays final judgment. His jurisdiction penetrates the unexplored fastnesses of the human heart. It follows the sweep of overwhelming ambition and is in judgment of it. It regards every kind of power that man can exercise over fellowmen and holds the exercise of that power subject to the Divine

Will, to the dignity of humanity and its moral destiny.

Swift as the lightning is this Judgment of God in every life. This realization of the presence of God, of His instant and infallible judgment of each of us at every moment, is the final secret of righteousness and sanctity. The saints knew it in highest measure as all the lovers of God know it in the measure indicated by their wisdom and loyalty. This realization of God's judgment is an internal, personal, transforming power, the pledge of consecration, the source of spiritual heroism, the revelation of God adapted to our capacity. It is the Divine product of love and grace. To realize this relation of God to every responsible action and to every moment is the highest privilege of man. Where this is found there are no postponed loyalties, no delays in repentance for sin, no excuse for sin, no belief that the prospect of later virtues will excuse present indifference to sin and defiance of God's law.

This present judgment of God is in a sense not God's judgment at all. It is we who are our judges. Judges as we know them in our courts are fallible. They must seek information, learn the law and guide its processes in the search for justice and truth. We are told in many texts of Holy Scripture that God judges us according to what we have done whether good or ill. In all cases God's judgment is made out of our actions. And thus it is that our choices under free will are God's judgment. His mercy endures forever. Without that mercy we had long since perished. We choose to obey God. We choose to disobey Him. Those choices, subject to our knowledge and moral

power, are the letters by which the judgment of God is formulated in respect of us. The days pass us one by one in solemn procession like bent figures of pilgrims "questing eternity". Each day carries ahead of us toward the eternal hills the record of our actions and there they await our final coming. God's judgment of us currently through life and at the moment of death is written in the terms of our behavior.

We are responsible for the care of our own souls and we are responsible in varying measure for the souls of others whom we influence. One need but recall the awful teaching of Christ concerning scandal. His denunciation of oppression, cruelty, and injustice, helps us to realize the measure in which the judgment of God takes into account the harm and suffering that we may cause to others.

These are elementary truths of spiritual life set forth from a personal standpoint. They have application, however, throughout all social life and no one can be excused from it.

Every life is a federation of interests in one spiritual Kingdom whose Ruler is Jesus Christ. We are by Divine intention spiritual and we cannot be otherwise. We are by Divine intention social and we cannot be otherwise. The structure of social life, the exercise of social authority, and responsibility for its exercise, are as definitely in the plans of God as is the kindling of the Morning Star. Social responsibility carried by anyone in any social position is definitely spiritual. They who exercise it are judged by God as to the manner of that exercise. It would be against all Theology, all Philosophy, all true culture to claim that any

social interest—business, industry, banking, recreation, journalism, scholarship, or art—enjoys the right of secession from the spiritual jurisdiction of God. Would it not be monstrous to assume that a governor or a legislator or an employer or an industrial executive or a banker or a labor leader or a reformer about to enter a conference dealing with any of these great social interests would attempt to put God and His law and all spiritual values outside of the door?

To refer God's jurisdiction to personal actions alone and fail to recognize it in every capacity of social leadership is nothing short of social as well as personal tragedy. God's judgment of us finds no such distinction valid. Until these spiritual truths are understood, respected, and accepted for social guidance we shall know no social peace. Our Holy Father in His recent Encyclical summarized all of our wisdom, all of our obligations in asking the world to think the thoughts of Jesus Christ and build our institutions and social policies upon them.

“But Thou our God art gracious and true, patient and ordering all things in mercy.

For if we sin we are Thine knowing Thy greatness:

And if we sin not we know that we are counted with Thee.

For to know Thee is perfect justice and to know

Thy justice and Thy power is the root of immortality.”

Wisdom XV.

THE SENSE OF DUTY

Address delivered on August 25, 1935

The dignity of life is in its obligations. Everyone is dependent upon countless others for the protection of life, of health, interests and happiness. The driver of a taxicab, the pharmacist who fills a prescription and the physician who prescribes for us, the market men that sell us food; the bridge builder and the home builder come near to us and render services that condition our security and even life. Our need of the services of others is fundamental and constant. Our duties are services that we owe to others in the plans of God. They arise out of the very constitution of social life and take their place with divine sanction. The foundations of duty were laid in the foundations of the world.

In as far as others have done their duty toward us we have been able to live, to grow, to be protected, to be educated, happy and effective. In as far as others upon whom we have depended have ignored or defied their duties toward us we have been injured or baffled or made unhappy. Let any of my hearers interpret the evil that he has observed in life, the moral disasters that he has witnessed, the degradation that has stalked across his pathway and he will find that these moral afflictions of the race have resulted because of duties neglected, boldly defied or misunderstood.

Let any of my hearers examine his own personal experience and recall the moments when he was most happy, most worthy, most assured and helpful to others; let him study men and

women whose nobility has aroused his admiration, whose example has given him courage and hope, and he will find that these benedictions have followed upon reverence for duty, the understanding of its place in the world, its impressive sanctions and unhesitating loyalty to it. The measure of our dependence upon one another in every relation of life indicates the role of duty under the continuing Providence of God as we seek our way out of the shadows and toward the light.

We cheat ourselves and weaken all moral forces when we misunderstand or under-rate the sanctity of duty and its commanding role. It is not merely a command to be obeyed without understanding. It is not merely an arbitrary interference with our preference or comfort. It is not a mysterious regulation that we half fear to disregard or half heartedly obey in order to be through with it. All such mistaken attitudes toward duty show lack of spiritual and social intelligence, undermine integrity of character and cloud the whole vision of social life.

Duty is an admirable form of self-discipline. Selfishness whispers its haunting temptations to us constantly. Temperament and passion and ambition dull our moral senses and beguile us into sinful ways. It is only when social vision holds before us the divine plan of life showing us when and where and how we can contribute to its fullness by our generous service in the form of duty, that we live as God would have us live. A broad understanding of the place of duty in the world sets before us the majestic structure of social institutions, of moral and social laws intended to curb selfishness and insure social peace. When

we see duty as a structural factor in the constitution of the social world we are lifted to the highest level of social intelligence and moral insight. Thus duty lacks no element of moral grandeur. Verily the dignity of life is in its obligations.

There are general and particular duties scattered throughout all life. The faithful performance of duty by father, mother and children is the essence of the Christian family, ennobles its members, safeguards the integrity of home life in our civilization, strengthens the social community by good example and corroborates Christian ideals. The faithless father or mother or child who defies duty and goes the way of self-indulgence with monstrous egotism, causes agony, degradation, ruined lives, scandal, and with defiant heart remains indifferent to them. Aside from these particular family duties the members of a family have general duties in all other relations of life. This is true of all groups. Physicians, attorneys, employers, laborers, clerks, bankers, priests, teachers have most important specific duties to perform and upon that performance the safety of life property, morality and our security will depend. The brick layer who has the duty of doing his work well and does it badly may endanger lives at a later date. When members of professions and occupations of all kinds do their duty well they justify the confidence that civilization gives them. When they do their duty badly that confidence is destroyed.

Aside from the specific duties of these and other professions there are obligations that arise out of the general nature of social life and hold us pledged to their performance under the plans of God. In our own history we have found too many satisfied

with a partial sense of duty, who have been faithful in particular relations of life but indifferent to duty to the community as a whole. Satisfaction with duties performed and indifference to duties neglected falls short of the moral integrity that the interests of Christianity demand. The extent to which our most competent social classes have failed to develop a sense of civic duty explains the disaster to social ideals which we have seen in our national life.

All serious persons are agreed that it is impossible to deal happily with a man who has no sense of duty or an inadequate and perverted sense of it or with a man who feels no shame at its betrayal. All normal social life exists by trust. It is only when we do our duty and we can trust others to do theirs in full measure that we can know happiness and peace. They who do their duty well are among the builders of the world. They take high place among its constructive forces. They have strength for every test understanding for every situation and motive for even the efforts of heroism. The serenity of Heaven possesses their souls.

Many duties are difficult and repugnant. Many duties tax the last resources of brave hearts. Some of them happily fall in with preference and cost no effort. Many of them lead to distinction and power. Others lead into the ways of obscurity and self-renunciation where one is unseen except by the watchful eye of our Heavenly Father and no record of one's heroism will be known to the children of men. Some duties seem so vague and remote as not to touch conscience at all. Civic duties, the duties of property, the duties of liberty are often looked

upon in this way, unfortunately altogether too often.

On account of these variations of difficulty and attraction in duty it is necessary to cultivate an impressive sense of it apart from circumstances, time and place, for the sanctions of duty are independent of these. The sense of obligation rises superior to every selfish consideration. Duty is seen in the splendor of its own sanctity and all compensation is found in the thought that God's work in the form of duty is our glorious privilege. Then one never counts the cost. 'Inen, as Newman said, our duty and our pleasure are the same. I wish now to suggest a few reflections on this larger view.

A duty clearly perceived and definitely outlined amounts to a revelation of the Will of God. When a duty presents itself to conscience one knows exactly what Almighty God demands at that moment. One knows it as definitely as though a visible messenger came straight from Heaven and offered audible direction as to the Divine Will. Duty means this or it means nothing at all. Conscience in respect of duty means this or it means nothing. The moral laws that define duty mean this or they mean nothing.

I do not overlook the fact that duty is not always presented to us clearly. It is often extremely difficult to discover what it is in given circumstances. For life situations are extremely complex and our wisdom falls far short of our need. When we must choose between apparently conflicting duties, when we doubt whether or not there is a duty at a given moment we have grave need of help. We must be on guard against all self-deception. The wish may be father to the thought in deciding upon

duty as it may be elsewhere. In situations where some scope is left for judgment as to duty one's whole philosophy of life will be indicated in the definitions chosen. Noble men make noble definitions of duty and live up to them. Mean men make mean definitions and live down to them even where conscience is not deliberately sacrificed.

The safety of institutions depends on a high sense of duty cherished wherever social power or leadership is found. Leadership in organized labor, political parties, legislatures, education, finance and industry is entrusted power not without its temptations, not without its dangers of perversion or of the moral blindness of intense conflict. Behind all of the disaster and uncertainty of the recent past in our national life the sense of duty toward the defeated social classes is struggling for expression. The strength that had forgotten its obligations by following a mistaken selfish philosophy had not understood the drive in the heart of humanity for social justice. Behind all of the social institutions that now carry our hopes for better days we must establish a sense of duty adapted to our problems and aspirations. Free institutions supported by such a sense of duty will transform the world. Without an adequate sense of duty, free institutions can only disappoint us and delay our peace and its justice.

CARDINAL HAYES STATES AIM OF THE CATHOLIC HOUR

(Extract from his address at the inaugural program in the studio of the National Broadcasting Company, New York City, March 2, 1930.)

Our congratulations and our gratitude are extended to the National Council of Catholic Men and its officials, and to all who, by their financial support, have made it possible to use this offer of the National Broadcasting Company. The heavy expense of managing and financing a weekly program, its musical numbers, its speakers, the subsequent answering of inquiries, must be met. . . .

This radio hour is for all the people of the United States. To our fellow-citizens, in this word of dedication, we wish to express a cordial greeting and, indeed, congratulations. For this radio hour is one of service to America, which certainly will listen in interestedly, and even sympathetically, I am sure, to the voice of the ancient Church with its historic background of all the centuries of the Christian era, and with its own notable contribution to the discovery, exploration, foundation and growth of our glorious country. . . .

Thus to voice before a vast public the Catholic Church is no light task. Our prayers will be with those who have that task in hand. We feel certain that it will have both the good will and the good wishes of the great majority of our countrymen. Surely, there is no true lover of our Country who does not eagerly hope for a less worldly, a less material, and a more spiritual standard among our people.

With good will, with kindness and with Christ-like sympathy for all, this work is inaugurated. So may it continue. So may it be fulfilled. This word of dedication voices, therefore, the hope that this radio hour may serve to make known, to explain with the charity of Christ, our faith, which we love even as we love Christ Himself. May it serve to make better understood that faith as it really is—a light revealing the pathway to heaven: a strength, and a power divine through Christ: pardoning our sins, elevating, consecrating our common every-day duties and joys, bringing not only justice but gladness and peace to our searching and questioning hearts.

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Produced by the National Council of Catholic Men,
1312 Massachusetts Ave., N. W.,
Washington, D. C.

Presented by the National Broadcasting Company, and the
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