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THE IDEAL PARISHIONER

BY
REV. JOHN S. SPENCE

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To
MONSIGNOR PATRICK C. GAVAN
THE IDEAL PASTOR
OF
THE IDEAL PARISH, THIS LITTLE
WORK, "THE IDEAL PARISHIONER,"
IS HUMBLLY DEDICATED

Nihil Obstat:

MICHAEL F. DINEEN, S.S., D.D.,
Censor Librorum.

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✠ MICHAEL J. CURLEY,
Archbishop of Baltimore.

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"The Ideal Parishioner"

*Conference from an Evening of Recollection Given at
the Washington Retreat House*

By Rev. John S. Spence

November 19, 1936.

MY FRIENDS:

With the utmost sincerity I tell you that I believe I am addressing a group of women, with whom I shall be associated some day as fellow-citizens in the kingdom of Heaven. That betrays a conviction that both you and I are striving to follow the Will of God, and that already we have attained a certain degree of personal sanctification. For that reason the purpose of my instruction this evening will be, not to better or quicken your relations with Almighty God, but to perfect your relations with that unit of God's Church, in which you are expected to work out your salvation—your parish.

Remember, my friends, I am giving you ideals. And if in the portraying of the perfect parishioner, I should indirectly show you defects in yourselves, please understand that no personal animosity or public reprimand is intended. No one here is my model of inspiration or of condemnation.

The perfection of a parishioner depends upon three different elements; namely, upon the proper understanding of what your parish is, upon the moral support you give it, and upon the financial support you extend in its behalf. Let us consider each one of these requirements separately.

FALSE CONCEPT OF PARISH

Some people look upon their parish as a group of buildings to which they must go to church, go to school or go for advice and help in time of trouble. The parish priests are the "beings" in charge of these institutions, the "individuals" to be contacted when some favor is wanted. If some other church is more convenient to reach, if some other priest is a better speaker or a more attractive personality, off they trip to these foreign fields, leaving the parish to be patronized only in time of need. For them there is nothing very personal about their parish or their parish priests, nothing more personal than there is about the nearest police station or fire department. The parish with all its facilities and accoutrements is there to offer service *if* and *when* they so desire. Unfortunately this is the concept of the rank and file of Catholics today; but this concept is wrong, absolutely and fundamentally wrong.

RIGHT CONCEPT OF PARISH

What is the proper attitude of the parishioner towards her parish? To understand, let us go back to the babyhood of Mother Church, and see how the inspired wisdom of the Apostles taught her to care for her children. Shortly after the Master left us to take up His abode in His heavenly kingdom, the early rulers of the Church gathered together in Council to determine just how they could best accomplish their divine mission of converting the world to Christ. They decided that each Apostle should set out to a distant land, there to establish a Church, and win to himself an army of believers, who would thus save themselves and

help save others. Together they formed a large family, the Apostle—the Father, the Christians—his children. Charity ruled amongst them. There was a mutual giving and taking of benefits and obligations. The bishop gave the people the Bread from Heaven and the Word of God, they gave him earthly bread and material means of carrying on the apostolate. Soon the conversions reached such proportions that the Apostles were forced to lay hands upon selected men, and give them the power of priests and deacons. These chosen ones were then given complete jurisdiction over definite groups of the faithful, and these in turn avowed allegiance to their appointed rulers. Between leaders and subjects there existed all the love and unity which prevail between father and family, shepherd and flock. Together they lived, loved and labored, not only to accomplish their own salvation, but also to bring the saving sermon of Christ to the pagans who flanked their side. This, my friends, was the beginning of the parish system. It was a divine plan of the Holy Ghost to bring order and harmony into the ever growing Church of God.

This, briefly, is how you should look upon your parish—as the providentially constructed unit of Christ’s Church, set apart and organized by your bishop, a successor of the Apostles, to provide salvation for yourself and to receive your support in providing salvation for all who dwell within its midst.

PARISH ORGANIZATIONS

And now we come to the matter of moral support. Next to the Sacraments, the most efficacious means the parish has of caring for the spiritual welfare of its

children are its spiritual organizations. For the ladies, there are the Sodality of the Blessed Virgin, the League of the Sacred Heart, the Study Clubs, the Dramatic Guild, and so forth. Are you a member? If not, why not? Do you regard these as unnecessary inventions calculated to burden you with extra obligations and responsibilities? Or do you regard them as being what they are—in reality—carefully devised plans to give God and His Blessed Mother the constant honor that is due them, to provide you with sound Catholic doctrine and wholesome Catholic recreation? Then besides the spiritual societies there are the social activities — the card parties, the suppers, the dances and the like, intended to provide financial support for the parish and at the same time to foster a friendly, Christian spirit amongst the people. Do you participate in them? If not, why not? To merely send in a dollar does not satisfy your obligation. Active personal coöperation is needed, too. How many people in parishes today like Pilate of old, try to wash away responsibility by dipping their fingers into a bowl of silver? They try to substitute the flip of a coin for the selling of tickets, the decorating of a hall or the washing of gravy-covered dishes. To give a little donation costs no sweat, no sacrifice. It is the easy way out. But they fail to realize that the *Cross*, which is the reason for, in and behind all church card parties, suppers and dances, is inseparably united with sweat and sacrifice. Are you a mere money giver?

HEAD HUNTERS—HEAD LOVERS

Then there are those women who are always willing to work for the church, as long as they can be the

chairwomen, the head. But let some one else be placed in charge, and they be asked to serve in the ranks, and immediately they find some reason to be excused. They are not working for the church. They are working for themselves. They are working for the miserable little bit of honor and glory that would come from a successful activity well-managed. Sometimes their fathers and mothers before them have run all church affairs. Then comes some new priest to the parish. He decides that new blood is needed; that too long has authority been placed in the same hands. So he asks another parishioner to take charge, and the old reliable to play an inferior rôle. It takes a big man and a big woman to say “Surely, Father, I’ll do anything you want. Let some one else have a chance at managing.” Are you that big?

Other some look upon organizations as the private hobbies of the priest in charge. Consequently if they like the director, they will join the Sodality; if they like him not, they will not join. They fail to see the end for which the organization was founded, and they see only the man who is directing its course for the moment. Are you one of these head-hunting and head-loving enthusiasts?

PAROCHIAL SCHOOL

The parochial school is the Heaven-sent means of training your children in the things that pertain to God. It is to be attended by *all* the Catholic children living within the parish confines. There young hearts are equipped with a splendid knowledge of all the essentials for life—life on earth and life hereafter. More than that they are imbued with a truly Catholic and

parochial spirit. They are taught to love their God, their Church and their country, their pastor and their priests. Children trained in public schools find it difficult to understand and respect the fatherly rôles the parish priests should play in their all too worldly lives. Are your children in the parish school? If not, why not? Have you a worth-while excuse for molding your offspring's soul in a fire not intended by Christ? Or is some petty trifle—such as a preference for the better equipped public school building, an antipathy towards the order of teachers or towards one particular teacher, the cause of your deviating from the educational course prescribed by the Divine Teacher, Christ?

CONCEPT OF PARISH PRIEST

One of the chief causes of spiritual and material stagnation in any parish is the improper attitude towards and the consequent failure to coöperate with the parish priests by so many self-willed relentless Catholics. Now I understand quite well that in many cases the priest is at fault. Well, we shall leave the job of correcting him to his bishop or to his Retreat Master. But suppose he has defects, peculiarities and eccentricities. Does that give the parishioners justification for not upholding his hands? It would, if he were a mere man working for himself, but it does not, since he is a divinely ordained and appointed ambassador of Christ, working to save not merely your soul but the souls of thousands as well. If you do not care for his person, at least you should care for his powers, his office, his apostolate, and consequently should promote the cause for which he is striving. If Christ or one of

the Apostles were stationed at your church today, not one parishioner in a thousand would refuse to coöperate with His endeavors, even though there might exist personal differences between them, because Christ's or the Apostles' mission openly deserve support. Now remember that your pastor and your assistants are all ambassadors of Christ, and in a certain sense, successors of the Apostles.

CLIQUEES

Another clot in the bloodstream of the parish is the formation of cliques. A certain person or group of persons may develop a “crush” on one of the priests. They may like his voice, his smile or the wave in his hair. The attachment, instead of enhancing their regard for the priesthood and its work, enhances only their esteem for the person of the single priest. Swept off their feet by the inordinate devotion they begin to shower him with favors, sing his praises and champion all his efforts. If it stopped there, the damage would not be serious. But it does not end there. Unconsciously, and sometimes consciously, in an effort to extol their idol, they begin indirectly to belittle the talents and the zeal of the other priests and to be niggardly in offering them support. If everyone indulged her personal inclinations to such an extent, what bedlam and chaos would result in the church! It is perfectly licit for you to have your likes and preferences, but show them only in a social, harmless way. Remember that each priest is a cog in the great wheel of Salvation, and consequently each one has his part to play. He may not be as brilliant, as glamorous as his brother of ten talents, but he is a priest just the same, entitled to your respect and aid.

STABBERS-IN-THE-BACK

In my contacts with parishioners I have found a great number of little stabbers-in-the-back. You know the type. "I wouldn't dare say anything about a priest of God. But Father So and So is very proud. I can tell from the way he holds his head." *That* kind. They have not the nerve to plunge the fatal dagger of public criticism, yet they never hesitate to wield the needle of private abuse. Every action or word of the priest they bite off, masticate, swallow and digest, until it emerges—polluted and utterly devoid of value. Listen to this: (Excerpt from *The Sign*, September, 1935.)

I am an average priest, a pastor, a much misunderstood individual. People suspect me of being a little more than human, but continue to invite me to eat their dinners and drink their wine. If I partake of the latter, they call me a "dear" and a "good fellow." If I refuse, they claim to be edified.

They expect me to have no faults, but keep on searching for them and having discovered a few—Oh, Boy!

When I have not prepared my sermon and my mind is cloudy and my ideas chaotic, they say I am too deep; but when I have labored with zeal and memorized my sermon they say I am superficial.

When through "money talks" I meet my parish obligation, I am a "grafter"; but when I do not plead for money and my parish goes into debt, I am a "poor business man."

When my liver is out of order and I am physi-

cally ill and mentally tired, they say I look pious and saintly. When I am well and bubbling over with zeal, they say I am frivolous.

They think I should love everyone in the parish and when I make a fairly good bluff at doing so they call me a hypocrite, but when I admit there are some I am not crazy about they call me a snob.

My wealthy parishioners find fault with me if I do not call upon them; the poor ones if I do.

Some people in my presence pretend to be keenly interested in all things pertaining to religion. They minimize my intelligence and exaggerate their own histrionic ability.

The stingy souls who contribute a very, very small proportion of their income to the church pity me because I have such a hard time raising funds. Those who contribute generously think I have a very nice job.

Some wonder what I do with all my time, others pity me because I have so much to do.

They want me to be more of a layman and to represent them in civil and public activities, but they are forever praising Father So-and-So because he is so “quiet and retiring.” “He is such a holy man.”

If I use forceful and catchy phrases in my sermons, they say I am sensational. If I don't, they will not come to hear me.

My salary is \$50 a month and I receive as much as \$5 for a baptism or a wedding (sometimes)—and they wonder what I do with all my money.

All stockbrokers think I am a millionaire; book agents think I am easy—tramps know I am.

COMMON CHARGES

Speaking of pride reminds me of a common charge hurled against us priests. Because we try to be reserved, dignified and conscious of our priestly office, we are accused of being aloof. Because we try to keep our hearts closed to private penetration but open to public possession we are accused of being insincere. Well, both charges are false. Our reserve is not aloofness, nor is our friendliness hypocrisy. We hold our heads high and stretch forth eager hands *on principle*, because we know that He Whom we represent had royal blood in His veins and that He died stretching out His arms to embrace the world.

SPEAKING FIRST

One more point on moral support! Here in Washington there seems to be the custom prevailing of expecting the priest to speak first when he meets you on the street. Now in a large city parish that is out of the question. I have been in Sacred Heart Parish for more than two years, and yet I do not know one-tenth of our parishioners. I pass people by feeling that they belong to our flock, but not daring to speak a word or raise my hat, because I receive no nod or bow of recognition. The people know the priests but the priest cannot know all the people. It is *their* duty and place to make some initial reverence, and the priest will always respond.

FINANCIAL SUPPORT

Let us pass now to the matter of financial support. I want to tell you a true story. The late Father Donahue of St. Patrick's in Baltimore had in his congre-

gation a certain, let us say, Mr. Jones, a man who received Holy Communion every morning, whose moral life was beyond reproach, and who manifested great external signs of holiness. One day the pastor sent for his parishioner, and in all seriousness said, “Mr. Jones, I am grievously afraid that you are going to lose your soul.” Mr. Jones, startled, said, “My God, Father, don’t tell me that. What have I done?” Father Donahue serenely answered: “It is not what you have done; it is what you have not done that will damn your soul. You own half a million dollars. You have no dependents. Yet you put a quarter in the collection basket on Sunday, and you do nothing more to aid the church or poor. Don’t you realize that God gave you your gold for another purpose besides that of hoarding in rusty vaults? He gave it to you in order to help yourself and others attain their eternal destiny; but you have been spending and saving only to provide material comforts for your selfish self.”

As the outcome of this brutal talk, Mr. Jones decided to save his soul, by founding several scholarships to St. Charles’ Seminary and by increasing his weekly contributions to his church. Are there any Mrs. Joneses in this congregation?

A FIXED PERCENTAGE

Way back in Old Testament times, when God walked and talked with His chosen people, He laid down the law commanding each person to give to the temple one-tenth of his income. For centuries this law was followed to the letter, and religion and charity thrived. Now times have changed of course. The cost

of living is greater today than it was in the time of Moses. What were undreamed of luxuries then, are absolute necessities today. Consequently the percentage given to God would not be as high. Perhaps it would be one-twentieth or one-thirtieth of modern earnings. But be that as it may, the ideal parishioner should feel the obligation of setting aside a certain percentage, a definite ratio which nothing short of famine or typhoon should prevent from reaching the coffers of her parish church. Call that sum the "sacred percentage"; put it down in your budget under any heading you will; but put it *down*—not merely in black and white but in silver and green.

FOREIGN CHARITY

What about that objection you have all felt and heard: "Oh, Father, I have so many obligations—I have to support the Novena at such and such a church—I have to send a check to Father So-and-So, that missionary over in India—I have to help Father Unfortunate with his chicken supper or bingo party: Therefore I can't give as much as I would like to my parish church. What about that objection? Well, Charity is a noble virtue; but never forget that *Charity begins at home*. Your parish needs, large or small, come first. Besides from way back in the labyrinth of memory there comes to my mind the remembrance of a certain commandment of the Church, "to contribute to the support of *your pastor*," a commandment which *I* was taught binds under pain of mortal sin. There is *no* command to contribute to the support of *anybody else's* pastor—but only your own. Conse-

quently it would not be a sin, if you cut off your support of strange novenas, Indian missionaries and hard-up priests; but it would be a sin if you cut off your support of your parish church. Therefore what should be our attitude towards all these worth while but foreign pleas for help? If you can fulfill your "sacred quota" to your parish church, and give to them besides—very well—go ahead and give, and may the Lord reward you for your goodness, but never forget that your parish budget must be balanced first.

HOW TO CONTRIBUTE

One final question must be treated. By what means, through what channels are you to contribute to the support of your parish? Some Catholics boast about the fact that they never miss a parish card party, turkey supper or oyster roast, and they expect their pastor to pin a medal on them for thus supporting the church. But analyze their motives and analyze their help. First of all such persons do not attend parochial activities out of love of God; they attend out of love of self. They enjoy the parish social functions more than society enjoys the tacky ball. So you see that by buying tickets they are not making a sacrifice for their church; they are merely paying for an evening of cheap entertainment. Moreover in most parishes card parties and socials are such rare events, that buying tickets for them could be called supporting the church no more than giving pennies to a baby for candy could be called supporting the child.

Some steadier, more reliable source of income is needed. *The offertory collection is that channel.* You

should give to that even when you are on vacation, that thus a permanent revenue may be assured your parish. But there is another reason why the offertory plate should be the main course you offer to Almighty God. In early Christian days the faithful used to bring gifts of bread and fruit to church, and at the offertory they were collected and later sold in order to provide the bread and wine for use in the Mass. The people felt that thus they became a part of the Sacrifice, since it was by their self-denial that bread was transformed into the Body of Christ. When the Sacred Host was held on high, they felt that part of themselves was in that Victim, and that they could strike their breasts and say "*My Lord and My God.*" The same truth holds good today. It is from the offertory collection that the altar bread and wine are bought, that the temple of God is kept in order and that the ministers of God are housed and fed. Hence if you make sacrifice to give your share, if you pinch and skimp that religion might live, then in truth when you gaze upon that white-robed figure holding that white Host above that white altar, you may feel with perfect right that it is "*My Lord, My God, My Priest, My Church.*"

This concludes our portrait of the perfect parishioner. Do you recognize yourself in that group? In the *group* I say, for it is not a single figure painted there but a pyramid of persons. The parishioner on one side clasping hands with the parish priest on the other, and above and behind Jesus Christ encircling both with His arms—the Trinity of love and power on earth—the sheep, the shepherd, the Master.



