

'STAND FAST IN THE FAITH'

(A Weekly Instruction specially written for the N.Z. TABLET by GHIMEL.)

THE SOLDIERS' SACRIFICE AND ITS REWARD

In these days of sorrow many brave fathers and mothers are asking questions about the eternal lot of those loved ones who have fallen in the service of their country, especially of those who during life fled from God, that tremendous Lover of Souls, 'down the nights and down the days, down the arches of the years.' Even non-Catholics look to the Catholic Church for an answer to these pressing questions; for some deep religious instinct tells them that she will speak the truth and, if possible, give them a ray of comforting hope.

It must be said at the outset that full light on this question awaits us only at the other side: here we walk through phantom shadows. Our Lord refused to say whether many shall be saved. Much about the ordinary ways of Providence did He tell us: the extraordinary ways He left in darkness. But what we do know assures us that all the unknown must be excellent. The Incarnation and the Redemption are standing proofs of genuine love for all without exception; and we ourselves have experienced enough of His other miracles of patient love to feel convinced that loving patience will not fail in the case of God's other children, less favored but perhaps less guilty. The arms of our Saviour's mercy are long enough to reach from one end of the world to the other and draw even the wanderers under the seamless robe of His unreasoned love.

Mortal sin, of course, will exclude one for ever from heaven, into which nothing defiled can enter. But then the sin must be a full, deliberate fault: no man will ever be condemned, except because calmly and deliberately he has refused to serve God according to the measure of light he has received. In this matter there is no need for us to call black white: but yet there is any quantity of white in the world. God made this world of ours, and it takes more than a few thousand years to spoil His work out and out.

It is not for us to trace the course of Divine Justice, or set bounds to the extent of Infinite Mercy in its dealings with each soul. His Justice is based on full knowledge of the minds of men—their dispositions, intentions, inherited weakness, involuntary ignorance, want of opportunities, the compensation made by suffering and acts of virtue. Of all these extenuating circumstances God will take account, for His Justice, instead of being relentlessly bent upon laying bare hidden evil, resolves itself into fair dealing and almost loses itself in the depths of mercy.

Large allowance must be made for the colossal amount and far-reaching extent of blundering ignorance in the world, especially in matters of religion. So long as this ignorance is genuine, involuntary, invincible, the sins committed under its mantle really cease to be sins of guilt, for which a man will be held responsible. The sin of the Jewish leaders in putting their Messiah to death after He had given so many clear signs of His Divinity often seems to us the one unpardonable crime, and yet our Saviour asked forgiveness for them, on the ground that they did not know what they were doing, and St. Paul declared that if they had known Who He was they would never have dared to crucify Him. So it may well be nowadays that while many live and die in heresy and unbelief, yet are their consciences clear, their intentions good, and their lives upright. Can we not believe that in their case God will sooner or later draw aside the veil that hides His Sovereign Beauty, and in ways unsearchable to us, give them the light of grace necessary for salvation. There are many ways of reaching God's feet, as various as men and the needs of men. The perfect may get there by following a straight path, the imperfect by climbing some crooked ladder. Even out of our failings and sins God is merciful enough to

strew the road by which we are to pass to Him. 'To him who does what lies in his power,' theologians are fond of saying, 'God will not deny His grace.' However tangled, twisted, and involved the threads of a man's life may be, God knows how to unravel them. However shallow the shallowest heart may be, the fathomless deeps of the Heart of God can stir it. Time hardly counts: God can light up in one brief instant the darkness of the dead black years, and pardon in a moment—the last of life perhaps—a life's offences. Sometimes it is the sword of death that gives life its real knighthood. It matters not that He is unsummoned by so many. Did He not come on earth nineteen centuries ago, unsummoned except by the resistless call of Love, which is Himself, and come to suffer for all without exception?

Here let me quote the measured and surpassingly tender words of one outstanding hero of this war, Cardinal Mercier, of Belgium:

'Greater love than this no man hath (said our Saviour) that a man lay down his life for his friends. And the soldier who dies to save his brothers, and to defend the hearths and altars of his country, reaches this highest of all degrees of charity. He may not have made a close analysis of the value of his sacrifice; but must we suppose that God requires of the plain soldier in the excitement of battle the methodical precision of the moralist or the theologian? Can we who revere his heroism doubt that his God welcomes him with love?

'Christian mothers, be proud of your sons. Of all griefs, of all our human sorrows, yours is perhaps the most worthy of veneration. I think I behold you in your affliction, but erect, standing at the side of the Mother of Sorrows, at the foot of the Cross. Suffer us to offer you not only our condolence but our congratulation. Not all our heroes obtain temporal honors, but for all we expect the immortal crown of the elect. For this is the virtue of a single act of charity: it cancels a whole lifetime of sins. It transforms a sinful man into a saint.

'Assuredly a great and a Christian comfort is the thought that not only amongst our own men, but in any belligerent army whatsoever, all, who in good faith submit to the discipline of their leaders in the service of a cause they believe to be righteous, are sharers in the eternal reward of the soldier's sacrifice. And how many may there not be amongst these young men of twenty who, had they survived, might possibly not have had the resolution to live altogether well, and yet in the impulse of patriotism had the resolution to die so well?

'Is it not true that God has the supreme art of mingling His mercy with His wisdom and justice? And shall we not acknowledge that if war is a scourge for this earthly life of ours, a scourge whereof we cannot easily estimate the destructive force and the extent, it is also for multitudes of souls an expiation, a purification, a force to lift them up to the pure love of their country and to perfect Christian unselfishness.'

The pressing duty of those left sorrowing or waiting is to pray for the soldiers: for the good amongst them who are working for their fellows and for God that their hearts may not grow weary; for those who have never sinned yet, and for those (there may be some) who have never learned to keep from sin; for those who hardly know how to pray for themselves or who have none to pray for them; for the pain-wracked and fever-tossed that some kind angel may bring them God's soothing gift of sleep; for the dying that they may find our Redeemer like His merciful Self; for the dead, that their self-sacrificing death for others may be a sacrament of thorns binding them to the King.

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