

THE GOSPEL IN PARIS:

S E R M O N S

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XI.

THE PRESENCE OF CHRIST.

"Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world."—MATT. xxviii. 20.

IF I did not believe in the divinity of Christ, I acknowledge that these words would fill me with astonishment. In fact, imagine a man, the greatest and holiest of men, imagine an angel or an archangel, terminating, as Jesus now does, the mission which he had received to evangelize the earth; what would be, what should be his closing words? The holier his character, the higher his rank in the scale of beings, the loftier also would be his idea of the greatness of God, the more would he fear to lessen it by usurping a portion whatever of the adoration and love which are due to God alone; eager to direct towards God the thoughts which hitherto had rested on His messenger, he would hasten to efface the traces of his own name and to lead his disciples to the feet of the Almighty, saying, with John the Baptist: "He must increase, but I must decrease."

What, on the contrary, does Jesus Christ say? "I am with you unto the end of the world." Have you reflected upon all which these words imply? The Chief Shepherd wishes to express in a last farewell all that is best fitted to comfort and strengthen the soul of His disciples; He wishes to prepare them, powerless though they be, for the conquest of the world, and in order to make them meet for this work He directs them, not only to the Father, but also to Himself; He sets Himself before them as the object of their faith, as the centre of their thoughts, as the perpetual source of their hopes, of their strength, and of their consolation. "Go, for I am with you; with you every day, with you unto the end." Therefore, suppose a man, a being whatever, thus daring to usurp such a part, and to set himself, unto the end of time, in the place of the living God! If these words are not spoken by the lips of a God, let us have the courage to say it, He who utters them is a usurper. Henceforth we must not speak of His humility, we must not hold Him up to the admiration of men, for He has yielded to the seduction of an unpardonable pride.

As for us who accept this promise as that of the Master we adore, let us endeavour to comprehend its depth and its import; and as we meditate upon the presence of the Lord in the midst of His people, God grant we may feel its powerful reality in our hearts! That will be, let us not doubt it, the best demonstration of our text.

"I am with you always." Would you see the immediate accomplishment of these words? Consider the very men to whom the Lord addressed them on the Mount of Olives. I venture to affirm, though this thought may appear

strange to you, that the apostles were never so conscious of the presence of Christ as after the day in which He left them.

Before that, it is true, their eyes saw Him; they witnessed His miracles and were subdued by them. They had seen Him with a gesture calming the angry sea, or recalling Lazarus to the land of the living; they had seen the loaves multiplying in His hands and satisfying the hungry multitude. And yet, did they believe? Alas! their faith was so feeble that the humiliation of their Master and the momentary triumph of His enemies sufficed to disperse them like cowards, to cause them to flee or to deny Jesus before a simple servant.

How is it, then, that, after Pentecost, these men, who hitherto had been so timid and fearful, boldly take their stand in the market-place, that these fishermen of Galilee are not afraid to contend with the ablest sophists of Jerusalem, that they confound them, that they cause such men as Festus and Agrippa to tremble upon the judgment-seat, that, threatened with torture, they brave it and openly rejoice in shame and suffering? Whence comes this strength? From the fact that they are no longer alone, for Jesus revealed by the Holy Spirit, Jesus is with them. When they saw Him with their eyes and touched Him with their hands, Jesus was less present with them than when they beheld Him only in spirit and with the eyes of the soul.

Before that, it is true, when they followed Him upon earth, their ears heard Him. Oh, incomparable privilege! What conversations were theirs, and how profound must have been the impression they produced upon their souls! How clear and luminous must Divine realities have appeared to them when viewed in the light of the simple parables which the Master Himself explained to them! How completely they must have been subdued by the supreme authority of those words which fell, so to speak, from the heights of heaven itself upon their consciences, imprinting there the seal of their Divine origin! And yet, see how they question the Master after His sublime instructions! What slowness to believe! What prejudices! What gross and carnal reasonings! How imperfectly do they understand the teachings of Jesus, and how quickly do they forget them!

How is it that later on everything becomes clear to them, and that, instead of disciples slow to believe, we see masters at whose feet Saul of Tarsus and Apollos are seated as docile children? How is it that the words of Jesus appear to them striking with evidence, and that, understanding them now for the first time, they in their turn astonish the multitudes and keep them hanging upon their lips? How is it that those Galileans, whose narrow and vulgar prejudices make us smile, are able to translate the thoughts of their Master in their discourses and letters with such depth of intelligence and unction that the Church of today, after the lapse of eighteen centuries, may still bend and drink at the inexhaustible fountain of life and holiness

which they have caused to gush forth in the world? What is the reason of all this? Ah! it is that they are no longer alone. . . . Jesus is with them. The strange words which He had addressed to them in His last conversations are now realised. "It is expedient for you that I go away," He had said. On that departure depended the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The Day of Pentecost has now come, and that great and all-explaining miracle has been wrought, that miracle without which Christianity is an incomprehensible fact. By the outpouring of the Holy Spirit those men have been so thoroughly transformed that we no longer recognise them. Jesus has revealed Himself to them with a grandeur which they had not even dreamed of. Yes, when they heard Him in the Temple or on the shores of the Lake of Tiberias, Jesus spoke less to their soul; His thoughts, His sentiments, His love were more strange to them. Now, for the first time, they know Him, they hear Him, they understand Him. Thus is the promise accomplished: "Lo, I am with you always!"

I will give you of this a proof still more convincing, for it affects us more nearly and impresses us as a fact. Do you know any being who is more continually present with mankind than Jesus Christ? Eighteen centuries separate us from Him, and yet today, in all parts of the globe, there are thousands of men in whose hearts He holds the deepest and most sacred place. There are thousands of men for whom fellowship with Christ is so inexhaustible a source of strength, peace, and joy, that so long as they will possess Jesus, were they in the most complete destitution, they will be happy; while, should Jesus fail them, their existence, otherwise unclouded, would be for them without hope. There are men who this very morning, while listening to the voice of preachers and missionaries, have received Jesus Christ, loved Jesus Christ, and adored Jesus Christ, and who would tell you that, of all the inward events which have marked their life, none has been more solemn or more stirring than the entry of the Prince of Peace into their heart and life; so that I can affirm that Jesus in the days of His flesh, surrounded by multitudes, was less present in the midst of men than He is today; that Jesus Christ absent, separated from us by eighteen centuries, enlightens more minds, converts more hearts, awakens more consciences, and gains more disciples to His cause than He did when He astonished the world by His miracles and when the crowds hailed Him with cries of "Hosannah!" What an admirable realisation of these words: "Lo, I am with you always!"

Observe, brethren, that this is a peculiar and distinguishing feature of Christianity. The other religions have never laid claim to anything like this. They have instituted rites and ceremonies; they have said: "Observe them and you will be saved," they have had prophets who have pretended to be the interpreters of the Divine will, they have had their Buddhas and their

Mahomets. But Christ alone has dared to lay claim to this moral prodigy of being present in the most intimate and most sacred home of the soul, and He alone has succeeded. This feature is so strange that it struck the greatest military genius of the age, and that, in his exile at St. Helena, Napoleon, comparing his reign with that of Christ, one day uttered the following words: "I have inspired with passion thousands who have laid down their lives for me; but for this my presence, the electric influence of my eye, my accent, a word from my lips, was always needed, then I kindled the sacred flame in their breasts . . . Christ alone has succeeded in raising the hearts of men to the invisible, even to the sacrifice of time and space. He alone from age to age demands that which is most difficult to obtain, that which many a sage vainly demands of his friends, many a father of his children, many a wife of her husband, many a brother of his brother; in a word, the heart. That is what He seeks for Himself. He claims it most absolutely, and He succeeds at once. What a miracle! Throughout time and space, the human soul with all its faculties becomes an appendix of the existence of Christ. All who sincerely believe in Him feel this admirable and supernatural love, this inexplicable phenomenon which is beyond the powers of mortal man, this sacred fire whose intensity cannot be lessened and whose duration cannot be limited by the great destroyer Time. That is what I, Napoleon, most admire, for I have often reflected upon it. And that is for me the most incontestable proof of the divinity of Christ."

We must, therefore, acknowledge that Jesus is true to His promise, that He is present in the midst of His people. Let us now endeavour to determine the nature of that eternal presence.

In the first place, that presence is *spiritual*. Some deny this, and tell us that they only can feel the presence of Christ who find it in the consecrated host, in the holy victim descending upon the altar at the word of the priest.

You all know the bewitching charms by which this opinion is surrounded. Here is a cathedral open for a solemn communion. The crowds gather into it and press even to the very altar; the service begins; the Liturgy slowly unfolds the successive acts of the religious drama. Incense fills the air, the majestic notes of the organ peal forth beneath the arched roof, and the imagination becomes insensibly softened by this grand spectacle. All at once there is a dead silence, the priest utters a creative word, and the host is transformed into the adorable God. Immediately the choir strikes up the solemn chants of *Ave verum, corpus* or *Salutaris hostia*. The Christ has descended, and the soul, overpowered by these inward emotions and sensible impressions, loses itself in a religious fervour.

A short distance off, in an upper chamber, a few believers are gathered together. Here nothing speaks to the senses or inflames the imagination; such, no doubt, in its primitive simplicity, did the worship of the Church at

its birth appear to the heathen world. In this assembly there are men who have placed their hope in Jesus Christ, and who, trusting in His promises, have come to call upon His name. His Word resounds in its sublime simplicity such as the publicans of Galilee heard it eighteen centuries ago. It seeks the unpardoned sinner in the refuge where he has sheltered his misery. His conscience is seized, and no outward impression is there to dispel or alter the emotion he feels. In this place, let souls thus stirred repent and address to the Saviour a cry of firm confidence, they will soon hear His pardoning voice, and, celebrating their deliverance, they will exclaim: "The Lord indeed was with us."

Well, of these two emotions, which was the true? Where was the Lord, upon the altar or in the upper chamber? He was wherever sincere believers invoked His name, and doubtless many souls that ardently called upon Him have found Him at the altar while communicating there; but will you deny that the believers in the upper chamber, who have been enlightened, sanctified, comforted by His Word, and who have tasted His grace, will you deny that they also have felt His presence? Now, if they have felt it, it is because that presence is spiritual; it is because, at the altar, as well as in the upper room, it depends neither upon a material rite nor upon a magical word; it is because it manifests itself wherever souls are found that hunger and thirst after righteousness and truth.

But if we affirm that the presence of Jesus Christ is spiritual, that it manifests itself to the soul and not to the senses, you must not think, however, that we look upon it as a vague and imaginary thing. The Christ whose presence we claim is not an ideal being, the offspring of our transitory emotions, a sort of humanitarian Messiah, whom each successive generation has remoulded in its own image, and to whom it has ascribed the language of its own particular aspirations. The Christ upon whose name we call is the Christ of the Gospels and of the Epistles, the Christ of St. Peter, of St. Paul, and St. John; such as they beheld Him, we behold Him now; the words which fell from His lips now reach our ears; He is ever the same, in Him there is no shadow of change. His disciples of the nineteenth century hear and understand Him just as well as those of the first. St. Paul claimed this fundamental equality for all when, renouncing the advantages which his Jewish origin and his relationship with Jesus according to the flesh might have given him over his proselytes, he says: "Though we have known Christ after the flesh, yet now henceforth know we him no more." In fact, it is by His Word that Jesus communicates Himself to all; it is by His Word that men may lay hold upon Him, see Him, and hear Him without fear of ever being deceived.

Is that all? Is it only by His Word that Jesus reveals to us His presence? No; for in that case He would share this characteristic with every man of

genius who leaves behind him the luminous traces of his thoughts. In fact, we may safely say of Plato or Cæsar, of Mahomet or Voltaire, that, though long since dead, they still speak; though separated from our period by the distance of centuries, they still act more powerfully upon the world than the great majority of the living.

Now there is infinitely more than this in the presence of Christ. Beneath the written Word there is the living Word; there is the invisible Saviour, who manifests Himself to the heart in such a manner that when I say He is present, I employ this expression in its most simple and literal meaning, as a child would do. It is in this sense that we may speak of the *real* presence of Christ, and it is indeed that presence which He has promised to the Church.

Here the thought which I had expressed at the beginning of this discourse comes back to me with new force. Suppose a Christ who will be a mere creature, and, however great you may picture Him, His presence will be but a figure, a vain metaphor, for on no account will you be able to ascribe to Him the Omnipresence which belongs to God alone. He will be present in your midst by His memory, by His example, by the words which He will have left you, that is all; as to calling upon Him or believing that He draws near to you, and interferes in your destinies, this will be out of the question. On the contrary, accept the Christ of the gospel, God the Saviour, and you will believe in His presence in the true sense of the word. Henceforth how everything changes in the Church and in your own life. The place in which you have called upon Him becomes a sanctuary for you, although it may have neither priest nor altar; the holy communion is no longer a vain and formal memorial, but the rendezvous where you meet the Saviour of your souls; all that the Scriptures reveal to you of the Father's love, and of the kindness of the Good Shepherd who seeks His wandering sheep, and guards His faithful flock, ceases to be an allegory, and becomes a reality which is accomplished in your life. He is present in your existence, present in happiness as well as in affliction, present in your solitary chamber as well as in the sanctuary, present in your busy hours as well as in the inactivity of sickness, yes, present, though invisible, until the day when you shall see Him "face to face," and when you shall find in His presence fulness of joy and pleasures for evermore.

Such is the teaching of the gospel concerning the presence of Jesus in the midst of His people. That presence, in the words before us, is particularly promised to the Church: "Go, instruct all nations; *and lo*, I am with you always." But I will not be unfaithful to my text if I affirm that the same promise is addressed to each Christian soul. Let us devote a few moments to the study of these words in their twofold application.

Jesus is present in the Church; "I am with you always." The Church, ah!

that is indeed the skiff which is in constant danger of being swallowed up by the angry sea, but which always weathers the storm, for she bears Jesus Christ. See her in the first years of her life. What a formidable coalition! What dangers, what hatred, what threats! All the powers of earth are leagued against her—science, priesthood, royalty, wealth, and, above all, corruption. The Church is about to disappear. No, on the contrary, it is then that she conquers the most souls, it is then that she sends her missionaries far and wide, it is then that she rises out of each of these baptisms of blood decked with fresh youth, strength, and immortality. Jesus is with her. But later she will aim at becoming a temporal power, she will cover herself with the royal purple; pompous and magnificent she will wear the triple crown, and it will seem as though she had denied her crucified King. What, then, do I see? What becomes of that Church? It is in the very hour when her triumph seems sure that her strength forsakes her. It is then that all the cities in which Paul had preached, in which the first prayers and hymns had been heard, are brought under the yoke of the infidels; it is then that the Cross, uprooted in Asia and Africa, seems on the point of disappearing from Europe itself. Nothing short of this formidable trial was required to teach the Church that her strength is derived from no earthly support, but that it lies entirely in the invisible presence of her Divine Head.

“I am with you always.” He has raised her, that Church, each time that, fainting and overpowered, she has called upon Him. And He will always raise her. I see other storms threatening her today. I see a proud and scornful unbelief like a freezing wind sweeping down upon her from the heights of science. I see it uniting with materialism, which rises from the low grounds. The storm is approaching, it falls upon the vessel of the Church, it rends her sails and shivers her masts. I hear faithless disciples exclaiming, “Master, Master, we perish!” We perish, brethren, and why? Is He not there, He who has promised His presence? Do you think that He who triumphed over the old world is unable to conquer the new? Do you think that He who from the Cross confounded the wisdom of Greece and the materialism of Rome, will be incapable of confounding the sophists and scoffers of modern times? He is with us. Do you think that unbelief is powerful enough to blot out that grand figure? Do you think it will ever succeed in ridding itself of Jesus Christ? As for me, I am tranquil. I wait until I see all the human explanations and systems break against the person of Christ as the waves of the sea dash powerless against the granite rocks of our coasts. I know that they will probably shake our reasonings, trouble our theology, break up all the human props by which we, men of little faith, had thought to sustain Him who sustains all things. But I am tranquil, for the Christ is with us. Yes, the storm is terrific, and sometimes we are utterly overpowered by it. . . Yes, we are feeble, feeble in science, in faith, in holiness; yes, in our

ranks there are defections which distress us, and betrayals which make our hearts bleed. . . . Oh, my God! on the side of the earth everything fails us, but Thou art with us, and that is enough. . . . Thou hast conquered by means which confound us, Thou hast conquered under the shame of Nazareth, of Gethsemane, of Golgotha. Divine Head of the Church, Thou hast given us the humiliation, wilt Thou not also give us the victory?

“I am with you always.” But methinks I hear an objection which rises in the minds of many who hear me. They admit that Jesus Christ may be present in a humbled and persecuted Church, for He has foretold that humiliations and attacks would be its lot upon earth; but that which causes them to doubt the reality of His presence is the sight of the inward condition of the Church itself. They see the Christian family divided; they see the different communions separated by an ever-widening gulf, in presence of the world which rejoices at this state of things. They see, in the very Churches to which we belong, the most deplorable dissensions. Or, what is sadder still, they see religious indifference spreading over souls like a dull and icy mist; prayer, zeal, and faith are gradually dying away in the approaching night; nothing is heard save the monotonous sounds of a formal worship. Here and there, on the gloomy background of the general darkness, a few devoted lives stand out solitarily and cast forth a light which, alas! is soon quenched. Oh! how is it possible then to believe in the presence of Christ?

Yet we must believe in it, and our belief must be all the stronger that nothing seems to proclaim it. We must believe in it, because when Jesus promised His presence to the Church, He knew that it would be made up of men such as we are, and He foresaw its faintings, its languor, and its falls.

Some of you, perhaps, have of the Church a magnificent ideal. You picture it to yourselves freed from the bondage of the world, conquering by faith and love. I rejoice at this if that hope fills you with a holy ambition, if you endeavour to realise that dream of your soul; but, on the contrary, I grieve, if, feeding your mind upon the picture of that imaginary Church, you cease to believe that the Lord is in the real Church to which you belong, and whose wounds and sufferings you deplore with so much reason. Remember what was the Church at its origin, when it was composed only of disciples directly chosen by Jesus Himself. What do I see in the upper room? . . . Disciples who will soon desert their Master, a Peter who will deny and a Judas who will betray Him. Is it for nought that the Word of God has placed that spectacle under our eyes? Remember those apostolical churches to which the Epistles were addressed. What agitations, what dissensions, what falls, what scandals! And yet the Lord was there. . . . Yes, those pangs of anguish which the state of the Church causes you have been felt at other epochs. At the close of the Middle Ages, in that fifteenth century when such thick darkness enveloped the world, when, from the pontifical

throne to the lowest monastery, the most frightful scandals dishonoured the Gospel, it seemed for a moment as though all beliefs were about to be swallowed up in universal doubt. Then many a pious soul, shut up within the convent cell, wept and groaned. "O Christ!" they cried, "where art Thou? Has Thy glory disappeared for ever? Return and visit Thy Church once more." Many books of that period bear traces of those bitter tears. And yet Christ was there, and the hour was drawing near when His Gospel, translated by the hand of a monk, would enlighten the world. . . . And who can tell, O men of little faith! that we are not on the eve of one of those solemn epochs in which the all-producing Spirit will renew the earth? Those secular structures which are crumbling into dust, that religious agitation which seizes upon so many minds, those new empires which open to the Gospel, and especially that universal yearning after a revival, those increasing aspirations of the Christian world which seems anew to believe in the efficacy of prayer,—are not those so many proofs of the presence of the invisible Head of the Church? are not those so many voices by which He tells us, "Lo, I am with you always"?

He is ever with us; He is here. He descends wherever two or three hearts call upon Him. Consequently, when I enter a Christian pulpit, I who would gladly sit in the lowest place among the least; when, from the midst of my weakness, I give testimony to the truth, and when, at the thought of the many human, petty, and miserable feelings which mingle with this solemn mission, I would fain close my lips, then this wondrous promise raises my courage: "The Lord is here." He is here, and that is the source of all our strength and hope. He is here, He who calls Himself the Way, the Truth, and the Life. He is here, He the supreme Preacher. He is here, He the Master of hearts and consciences. He is here, and we may direct our souls to Him; and when our feeble and powerless voice becomes obedient to His, when our wisdom becomes His wisdom, our testimony His testimony, our word His word, then whatever we bind upon earth is bound in heaven; then to those to whom we remit sins, their sins will be remitted; then our authority becomes the grandest and most solemn thing in the world; for, above the man, above the preacher who will soon disappear, there is the Christ, who reigns for ever and ever. "Lo, I am with you always."

This promise, therefore, is made to the Church, but it is also made to each individual soul; it is to each of us that Christ has promised His presence, and His presence unto the end. Alas! how small is the number of those who realise this most consoling of all promises; and if I could read in your hearts, how many doubts would be raised by this one question: "Is the Lord with you?"

How can He be with us, many who hear me will perhaps say, since He leaves us exposed to so many afflictions, since trials are allowed to fall

continually upon us? Where are those cares of His providence which attest His presence? Where are those unexpected deliverances, those prayers answered, those signs by which men recognise that He is with them? Behold, we had placed in Him all our confidence, and, in many cases, everything has failed us. Misfortune has followed us unremittingly, and we have been distinguished from the rest of our fellow-men only by the blows which have struck us again and again.

When we hear words like these, when we see how many souls are led to doubt through trial, when we perceive how murmuring—that forerunner of unbelief—easily comes to our lips, can we still deny that there is in our heart a mercenary instinct which seeks its own interest even in love? And when, I answer, have you seen in the Gospel that, in calling us to His service, Jesus Christ has promised us the blessings of earth, the favour of men, whatever our heart desires? Hear Him, rather, declaring that through much affliction heaven is entered, and that through sorrow He will make us partakers of His holiness. You find in the blows that strike you the proof that God forgets you; and I, on the contrary, resting upon the Scriptures, find in them the proof that He loves you, and wishes to save you. This is so true that if you could point out to me a man whom no affliction has ever reached, a man whose entire existence has been one tissue of unbroken prosperity, I would tremble at the thought of such a man's future, for it would seem to me as if God had abandoned him. Trial is the Divine educator. "Blessed are they that mourn," saith the Lord. Yes, as Isaiah says, their name is written on the palm of His hand, when that hand strikes as well as when it blesses. You desired to settle upon the earth, to sit down in cool and shady places, to drink peacefully at the spring which gushed forth at your feet. "March on!" says the Divine Voice, and the shadow is dispelled by the burning rays of the sun, and the stream is dried up. Onward through the wilderness! Onward thou, the redeemed of the Lord! Stranger and traveller! take up the pilgrim's staff once more; follow that mysterious voice; it calls thee; it is the voice of the Lord. He calls thee whither He Himself has preceded thee. He *is* with thee *always*.

Yes, you will answer, yes, affliction may be a proof of the presence of the Lord. We understand this, for it often sanctifies. But is it so with that mysterious state through which I am now passing? Can I believe that the Lord is there when my soul is dried up, and when nothing can restore life to it, when my faith cannot take its flight, when the realities of heaven float before my eyes like dim phantoms, and when the promises of God no longer awake the slightest joy in my soul? Ah! the presence of the Lord! I have felt it once, and then how easy was everything to me! Then faith gave me wings, prayer rose ardent from my heart; but today, even those words which you are explaining are meaningless to my soul.

Meaningless! Are you sure of this? What then is that sadness which fills your soul when you utter these words? Meaningless! O disciples of Emmaus, you think that the Lord has left you for ever, and you are unconscious of the truth that He is journeying by your side till the blessed moment when He will reveal to you His presence. Meaningless! O you who think you have lost your God, and who grope for Him, as it were, do you not hear what He says to you by the mouth of Pascal: "Thou wouldest not seek Me thus if thou hadst not already found Me?" But this presence leaves you in darkness! Listen!

In the gloomy days of winter, no tree waves its verdant top in our fields, no flower gives its perfume to the winds; everything in nature seems to be dead. Yet will you say that the sun has not risen? No; although it has disappeared behind a curtain of clouds, its powerful action is felt everywhere, and without this sun which you do not see, nought would remain but an icy shroud, and the frightful obscurity of an endless night. Brethren, the soul also has its winters, in which the Sun of Righteousness sheds upon it only a pale and feeble glimmer, in which heaven is veiled, in which obedience brings no joy, in which the biting wind of discouragement pierces and freezes us through and through. I know that these seasons are often forgotten in those theories of the Christian life framed after a system, and according to which everything for the believer should be joy, peace, and light. But question those who have pictured the heart of man such as the Spirit of God has revealed it to them. Question David and Isaiah. None were ever so completely honoured with the presence of God as they; and yet, do you know of any book in which the languor, the misery, the anguish, the terror of the soul that feels itself forsaken of God is more vividly portrayed than in those written by their hands? What language is better fitted than theirs to express the struggles and griefs of your hours of sadness? Well, those are the men whom the Spirit of God has chosen to be His interpreters. You who suffer like them, what right have you to say that God is forsaking you?

Here we are on the brink of an abyss. I have endeavoured to reassure your souls; in order to dispel them, I have brought before you the causes which prevent you from feeling the presence of the Lord. Have I said all? have I said that which it was particularly necessary I should say? No, I have not named the true, the great cause which hides Jesus Christ from our sight. You who complain that heaven vaguely floats before your troubled gaze, and that the figure of Christ is growing dim and disappears, seek to ascertain whence come the clouds which conceal it from you. Whence rise they if not from the impure fountain of sin? That secret but ardent worship of your own glory, that feverish pursuit of fortune or of an exalted position, that current of affairs by which your soul is carried away, that hate and bitterness in which your heart shamefully delights, that cowardly compliance

with the opinion of others, that love of dissipation, of dress and of worldly frivolity, those tolerated and fondly cherished passions, those guilty bonds which you are unwilling to break, these are the clouds which blind you and which prevent you from realising the presence of the Lord.

Do you recollect, on the contrary, those calm and blessed hours in which, like the apostles on Mount Tabor, you have beheld the Saviour face to face? How lovely did His Divine countenance then appear to you, and with what rapture did your eyes rest upon it! But those hours had not appeared in your life like an unexpected flash of lightning; prayer had prepared them, fidelity had produced them. Then indeed you felt the truth of these words, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." Sanctification, this then is the narrow path which leads to the summits where Christ manifests Himself to the soul. No, it is not, as some have believed, to imaginations lost in ecstasy that this vision of God, the sweetness of which saints have sung, has been promised; it is to sanctified souls. You who complain at having lost the Saviour, do you not see that He is there, waiting for you in the spot where you well know must be completed the sacrifice which you have hitherto refused to make? He is waiting for you, not in the midst of your comforts and joys, but in the stern solitude of abnegation. He is waiting for you in the narrow way which you have left, and in which you had met Him once; waiting at the bedside of the poor whom you have forsaken. Be faithful and you will see that He is faithful too, and that He is true to His promise: "I am with you always."

I cannot set aside these sublime words without pointing out to you the consolations and the duties which flow from them.

"I am with you," says the Lord, "with you always, with you unto the end."

Is there upon earth anything more beautiful than faithful love? When an attachment which has sprung from two hearts with the sap of youth has outlived all the hopes, all the enchantments of life in its spring-time; when, strengthened by joys, and still more by common afflictions and tears, it has gone on increasing; when neither the changes of taste and fortune, nor the vexations of everyday life, nor the deceptions of experience, have been able to weaken it; and when, at the age when everything seems to decay, affection still casts a bright and joyous light, is there not in this spectacle something which raises and honours our wretched humanity?

But, great God! how rare is that spectacle! How many of our affections have found an early grave! One has left us with the intoxication of youth; another has fled before poverty or some other sorrow of life. The more we advance on our way, the fewer they become. And those we loved the best and on whom we relied for the future, where are they? How many bereavements in the past, and in the future how many separations still! Oh, if

we could but possess a love upon which our heart might rest as on a rock; if always, at every hour, we could feel its powerful reality, what strength and what consolation would this bring to our life! "Behold, I am with you always," is Jesus Christ's reply. Yes, always; for in Him there is no shadow of variation. Such as He appeared to us for the first time on our path, He still is today. We have, perhaps, followed to their last resting-place the beings we loved, and upon their tombs we have graven these words: "There is no lasting affection here below;" but when we were leaving the graveyard to return to the city of the living, the invisible Friend bent down and whispered in our ear: "Behold, I am with you always." Nothing has kept Him away; poverty has not banished Him, like so many others; sickness, bereavement, anguish, which so soon weary earthly friendships, have brought Him to our side with greater eagerness. Nor will death itself alienate Him, for He has said: "I am with you unto the end." Yes, when I shall walk through the valley of darkness, through the valley of the shadow of death; when earth will have no more consolation or hope for me, He will be there, even there. Then take thy flight, O my soul! and since all earthly things grow dim and change, attach thyself for ever to Him from whom nothing will be able to separate thee. And you, my brother, my sister, who are journeying alone in the unheeding crowd; you who, in the midst of an agitated life, so keenly feel the inward void which nought that is earthly can fill, let this promise gladden your hearts: "Behold, I am with you always."

Those are the consolations; here are the duties. Brethren, if Jesus were here today, where would He lead you? Into that worldly and frivolous society which is perhaps waiting for you? Beside those whose lives grieve Him? Could you, in His presence, still share in their guilty pleasures? Could you find any joy in the company of men who would regard Him with indifference? Could you meanly crave their approbation? Could you run in the way of temptation, seek that which flatters your vanity or your passions, read that book which will taint your soul? In a word, could you persevere a single day longer in a life which God condemns? Let your conscience answer!

If Jesus were here today, where would He lead you? Where did He go when He was upon earth? Where would He conduct you now? To humble and obscure duties. Not to the broad way of pride, but to the narrow way of obedience; not to enjoyment, but to sacrifice; not to glory, but to humility; not to an earthly crown, but to the Cross. He would lead you to the poor, to the sick, who are, it may be, waiting for you; to that broken heart that has need of you; to all those sorrows which He would have you understand and comfort. Go, brethren, wherever He calls you. Today in humiliation, tomorrow in glory; but in humiliation as well as in glory, with Him, ever with Him!

