

Seven Friendly Warnings for the Would-Be Christian

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In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

A little later there is something I have to say to you on the subject "Seven Friendly Warnings for the Would-Be Christian." But first there are three texts which are pertinent to that subject, which ought to be read in this connection.

The first text is from the *Rule* of St. Benedict, concerning the procedure of receiving new brothers into the monastic community.

Concerning the Manner of Receiving Brothers. When any new comer applies for admission, an easy entrance shall not be granted him: but, as the Apostle says, 'Try the spirits if they be of God' [1 John iv. 1]. Therefore, if he who comes perseveres in knocking, and is seen after four or five days to endure with patience the insults inflicted upon him, and the difficulty of entrance, and to persist in his demand, entrance shall be allowed him, and he shall remain for a few days in the cell of the guests. After this he shall be in the cell of the novices, where he shall meditate and eat and sleep. And an elder brother shall be appointed for him who shall be capable of saving souls, who shall watch him with the closest scrutiny, and make it his care to see if he reverently seek God, if he be zealous in the service of God, in obedience, in suffering shame. And all the harshness and roughness of the means through which God is approached shall be told him in advance. If he promise perseverance in his steadfastness, after the lapse of two months this Rule shall be read to him in order, and it shall be said to him: 'Behold the law under which thou dost wish to serve; if thou canst observe it, enter; but if thou canst not, depart freely.' If he have stood firm thus far, then he shall be taken into the aforesaid cell of the novices; and again he shall be tried with every kind of endurance. And, after the lapse of six months, the Rule shall be read to him; that he may know upon what he is entering. And, if he stand firm thus far, after four months the same Rule shall again be re-read to him. And if, having deliberated with himself, he shall promise to keep everything and to obey all the commands that are laid upon him: then he shall be received in the congregation; knowing that it is decreed, by the law of the Rule, that from that day he shall not be allowed to depart from the monastery, nor to free his neck from the yoke of the Rule, which, after such long deliberation, he was at liberty either to refuse or receive. He who is to be received, moreover, shall, in the oratory, in the presence of all, make promise concerning his steadfastness and the change in his manner of life and his obedience to God and to His saints; so that if, at any time, he act contrary, he shall know that he shall be condemned by Him whom he mocks. . . . (Sec. LVIII, Bettenson, 2d ed., P. 175)

The second text similarly advises the new comer to reckon in advance the cost of discipleship, Luke 14:27-33.

Likewise the third text, Matthew 20:20-28.

In addition to this week's being the week for the Prayer of Christian Unity, it has also been designated by our pastoral staff as a week for celebrating the church's *mission*. That mission theme was prompted by our commemoration of the Conversion of Saint Paul. Conversion is not all, but certainly part of, the church's mission. In the course of this missionizing, has the church always given the convert, or the would-be convert, fair warning as to what he is in for--the way the Benedictine community did, or the way certain traditions in Judaism have done for the non-Jewish proselyte who was contemplating joining the synagog? Perhaps the church owes it to those who stand on her threshold to combine with her invitation to them a friendly warning about the risks which await them in the church. I would like to suggest seven such friendly warnings which would enable newcomers to come into the church with eyes wide open.

For the church to alert the newcomer to her own problems is only fair. But it is more than fair. For the warning I have in mind has to do with problems which, to be very honest, are not really problems at all. For if they are problems, they are problems which no Christian would want to be without. So if in the warnings which follow you detect a large measure of tongue in cheek, then I can only say that you are very perceptive. It is a warning like the Volkswagen advertisements are warnings, which warn you that if you buy a Volkswagen you will suddenly lose the desire to buy a new car each year. Are you willing to put up with such a deprivation? Likewise it is a kind of private joke among us who live in the church of Christ that the problems of this household are the blessed problems of the blessed. If you have problems like those, "happy are ye." So the friendly warning is not just fair. It is a subtle part of the invitation.

Problem number one. Once you become a Christian, you will find it increasingly difficult to commit a really enjoyable sin. Somehow all the old fun goes out of sin – not just the wicked sins like adultery and indolence and prejudice but even the pious sins. Take worry, for example. Ordinarily you would expect that worry is a mark of conscientiousness, the sort of thing which responsible people do and for which they might feel some pardonable pride – as, for example, when they say half proudly, "I'm worried about tomorrow's lecture," or, "I'm sure I failed that exam." But the trouble with Christianity is that it takes all the virtue out of worry. In fact worry itself becomes something to worry about, not just because worry is hard on the digestion but because worry is unbelief and because unbelief is, in the strong language of the Sermon on the Mount, hatred against God. It would be considerably more comfortable not to know that.

Problem number two. You will not even be able to take pride in your new sense of sin. You will be all set to feel good about the fact that you can feel so bad, only to learn that what is wrong with that in turn is that it denies the forgiveness of sin. That, in fact, is the unforgivable sin, not because it is more sinful than other sins but because it refuses to be

forgiven, because it refuses to let itself be suffered out of existence by someone else (I refer to Jesus Christ) who did not even commit the sin in the first place. And believe me, there are some sins for which it just does not seem right or manly to ask Him to take responsibility. Yet not to do so is seriously to underrate Him. It is to pretend that His atoning love can be out-sinned. There is something gratifying, I suppose, about thinking of yourself as being beyond help, and something awfully humbling about learning that in Christ you are nothing of the kind.

Problem number three. You may think it is hard to believe that people are as *bad* as Christians claim. That is nothing. Wait till you hear how *good* they claim people can be. “A chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people.” “The holy Christian church, the communion of saints.” “Beloved, now are we the sons of God.” And who is “we”? The same folks who are the sinners. Saints and sinners simultaneously. The hardest thing about the Christian Gospel – the “good news,” as we call it – is not its bad news about fallen humanity but its good news about the new humanity. Most often it will seem too good to be true.

Problem number four. The real poser, though, is what Christians say about Jesus Christ. You would think we would be content with saying, as we do in our creed, that He is “very God of very God...incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the virgin Mary...was crucified...the third day He rose again.” But no. That much, we say, the devil knows too. The crux (if you will pardon the pun) of our faith is in the words “for us.” We have died out on our sin and our trouble because He has destroyed it in His own body *for us*. He has gone to all the trouble, He has taken the trouble, He has taken the trouble away – for us. We come alive because He is life *for us*. All this He has done, as the creed says, “for us men and for our salvation.” The problem is that there will be times when you will have all you can do to utter these words, “for us” – that is, to utter them without choking up or dancing for sheer joy or making a bit of a fool of yourself, a fool for Christ. Beware especially of Christmas Eve and Easter Sunday.

Problem number five. You will be scandalized by what you believe. As any pious, reasonable man knows, in this world it is a basic law of life (and of God) that you ought to deserve what you get. Yet Christians claim that the cross lifts you above that law, above that order of retribution and deservedness, out of this world, and confers on you the freedom and the value, shall we say, of a minor deity. How does it do this? Gratis, by grace alone. That claim, again and again, will strike you as downright unlawful, unlike normal life, unlike the normal God. The claim will seem irresponsible, or at least impractical. But your big problem will be, not just believing it, but explaining why on earth you do believe it. Almost against your better judgment, the claim claims you.

Problem number six. One of the most trying things about life in the church is the church herself. You are aware, of course, that church people are not angels. At least not yet. In fact your reason for avoiding the church this long may have been that, as everybody says, “the church is full of hypocrites.” Honesty compels me to admit that once you are inside, your suspicions will only be confirmed. Actually, matters get worse. Once inside, you will be under constraint to love these hypocrites. Nothing could be harder – nothing

except the discovery that they love you on the same terms, indiscriminately. That is a problem: getting used to being loved regardless of who you are. It would all be much easier if the church were not what she is: a company of sinners being treated like a “communion of saints.” If you’re not accustomed to eating and drinking at the same table with deity, or to singing and dancing in the midst of the saints of all ages, you might find the church to be rather fast company.

Problem number seven. When you join the church, you have everything to lose. Not only the money you could otherwise save, but all the other dear savings as well: face-saving, time-saving, health-saving, life-saving. A Christian can lose face simply by turning the other cheek, by closing an eye, by opening his mouth, by swallowing hard. Bearing the cross can cost you your sleep, your digestion, your longevity. However, letting go of these things is not the big problem. The big problem is letting go of them with a straight face, without laughing. Your impulse will be to break out in Spirited laughter. You will be tempted to exult, "I couldn't care less," "I have nothing to lose but myself," "I count all loss as gain because of Christ," "the kingdom ours remaineth," and other similarly reckless expressions. In the end the hilarious impulse will be more than you can restrain. When that happens, you will have no choice except to let yourself go, and simply cheer. The appropriate exclamation at that point is “Hallelujah” – which is the Biblical equivalent of “Hurrah for God,” the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. It is a problem, in other words, of self-restraint. You will face that problem sooner or later – or, more accurately, forever and ever.

Won't you come in, please? :