

HELL'S WIDEST GATE : IMPURITY

By

ST. ALPHONSUS LIGUORI

with Three Related Sermons
and an Appendix

Edited by Br Sean, a choir monk, 2009
from etexts at catholicculture.org and archive.org

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"Broad is the way that leads to destruction, and many there are who go in that way" (Mt 7.13). Hell has then different gates, but these gates stand on our earth. "Her gates are sunk into the ground." (Lam 2.9) These are the vices by which men offend God, and draw down upon themselves chastisements and eternal death. Among the other vices, there are four which send most souls to Hell, and on this earth bring upon men the scourges of God; and these four are, HATRED, BLASPHEMY, THEFT, and IMPURITY. Behold, the four gates by which the greater number of souls enter Hell; and it is of these four that I mean to speak today, in order that you may amend and cure yourselves of these four vices, otherwise God will cure you of them, but by your own destruction. (See "The Four Gates of Hell" at archive.org)

1. Hell's Widest Gate: Impurity

We have now to speak of the fourth gate of Hell, which is impurity [sexual sins], and it is by this gate that the greater number of the damned enter. Some will say that it is a trifling sin. Is it a trifling sin? It is a mortal sin. St. Antoninus writes that such is the nauseousness of this sin that the devils themselves cannot endure it. Moreover, the Doctors of the Church say that certain demons, who have been superior to the rest, remembering their ancient dignity, disdain tempting to so loathsome a sin. Consider then how disgusting he must be to God, who, like a dog, is ever returning to his vomit, or wallowing like a pig in the stinking mire of this accursed vice (2 Pet 2.22). The impure say, moreover, "God has compassion on us who are subject to this vice, because He knows that we are flesh." What do you say? God has compassion on this vice? But you must know that the most horrible chastisements with which God has ever visited the earth have been drawn down by this vice. St. Jerome says that this is the only sin of which we read that it caused God to repent of having made man, for all flesh had become corrupted (Gen 6.6-12). And so it is, St. Jerome says, that there is no sin which God punishes so rigorously, even upon earth, as this. He once sent fire from Heaven upon five cities, and consumed all their inhabitants for this sin (Sodom and Gomorrah,

Gen 18-19). Principally on account of this sin did God destroy mankind, with the exception of eight persons, by the flood. It is a sin which God punishes, not only in the other life, but in this also. Because, says God, you have forgotten Me and turned your back upon Me, for a miserable pleasure of the flesh, I am resolved that even in this life you shall pay the price of your wickedness (Ezek 23.35). You say, "God has compassion upon men subject to this sin." But it is this sin that sends most men to Hell. St. Remigius says that the greater number of the damned are in Hell through this vice. Father Segneri writes that as this vice fills the world with sinners, so it fills Hell with damned souls; and before him St. Bernardine of Siena wrote: "This sin draws the whole world, as it were, into sin." And before him St. Bernard and St. Isidore said that "the human race is brought under the power of the devil more by lust than by all the other vices." The reason is because this vice proceeds from the natural inclination of the flesh. Hence St Thomas Aquinas says that the devil does not take such complacency in securing the commission of any other sin as of this, because the person who is plunged in this infernal mire remains lodged therein, and almost wholly unable to free himself again. "No one is so obstinate in sin as the impure," says St. Thomas of Villanova. Moreover, this vice deprives one of all light, for the impure man becomes so blind as almost wholly to forget God, says St. Laurence Justinian; which is in accordance with what is said by the prophet Hosea: They will not set their thoughts to return to their God; for the spirit of fornication is in the midst of them, and they have not known God (Hos 5.4). The impure man does not know God; he obeys neither God nor reason, as St. Jerome says; he obeys only the sensual appetite which causes him to act like a beast.

This sin, because it flatters, makes us fall at once into the habit of it, a habit which some carry with them even to death. You see husbands, and decrepit old men, indulge in the same thoughts and committing the same sins that they committed in their youth. And because sins of this kind are so easily committed, they become multiplied without number. Ask of the sinner how many impure thoughts he has consented to: he will tell you he cannot remember. But, brother, if you cannot tell the number, God can; and you know that a single willful immodest thought is enough to send you to Hell. How many immodest words have you spoken, in which you took delight yourself, and by which you scandalized your neighbor? From thoughts and words you proceed to acts, and to those innumerable impurities which those wretches roll and wallow in like swine, without ever being satisfied, for this vice is never satisfied. But, Father, you will say, how can I hold out against the innumerable temptations which assail me? I am weak, I am flesh. And since you are weak, why not recommend yourself to God, and to most holy Mary, who is the mother of purity? Since you are flesh, why do you throw yourself in the way of sin? Why do you not guard your eyes? Why do you gaze upon those objects from which temptations flow?...It is to be remarked, moreover, that this sin brings with it innumerable others: enmities, thefts, and, more especially, sacrilegious confessions and Communions, by reason of the shame which will not allow these impurities to be disclosed in confession. And let us remark here in passing, that it is sacrilege above all things that brings upon us sickness and death; for, says the Apostle, "He that eats and drinks unworthily, eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the body of the Lord"; and then he adds: "therefore are many infirm and weak among you." (1 Cor 11.29-30) And St. John Chrysostom, in explanation of that passage, says that St. Paul speaks of persons who were chastised with bodily infirmities because they received the Sacrament with a guilty conscience. My brethren, should you ever have been sunk in this vice, I do not bid you be disheartened, but arise at once from this foul and infernal pit; beg of God immediately to give you light, and stretch out His hand to you. The first thing that you have to do is to break with the occasion of sin: without that, preaching and tears and resolutions and confessions, all are lost. Remove the occasions, and then

constantly recommend yourself to God, and to Mary the mother of purity. No matter how grievously you may be tempted, do not be discouraged by the temptation; at once call to your aid Jesus and Mary, pronouncing their sacred names. These blessed names have the power of making the devil fly, and stifling that hellish flame within you. If the devil persists in tempting you, persevere in calling upon Jesus and Mary, and certainly you shall not fall. In order to rid yourself of your evil habits, undertake some special devotion to our Lady; begin to fast in her honor upon Saturdays; contrive to visit her image every day, and beg of her to obtain for you deliverance from that vice. Every morning immediately after rising, never omit saying three "Hail Marys" in honor of her purity and do the same when going to bed;* and above all things, as I have said, when the temptation is most troublesome, call quickly upon Jesus and Mary. Beware, brother, if you do not be converted now, you may never be converted. (Act of contrition and *Memorare*.**)

***The Hail Mary**

Hail, Mary, full of grace,
the Lord is with thee.
Blessed art thou among women
and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.
Holy Mary, Mother of God,
pray for us sinners,
now and at the hour of our death.
Amen. (Cf Lk 1.28,42)

****Act of Contrition:** O my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended Thee, and I detest all my sins because of thy just punishments, but most of all because they offend Thee, my God, who art all good and deserving of all my love. I firmly resolve with the help of Thy grace to sin no more and to avoid the near occasion of sin. Amen.

The *Memorare* (attributed to St Bernard)

Remember, O most gracious Virgin Mary,
that never was it known
that anyone who fled to thy protection,
implored thy help,
or sought thy intercession,
was left unaided.
Inspired by this confidence
I fly unto thee,
O Virgin of virgins, my Mother.
To thee do I come,
before thee I stand,
sinful and sorrowful.
O Mother of the Word Incarnate,
despise not my petitions,
but in thy mercy hear and answer me.
Amen.

From "The Four Principal Gates of Hell"

Part of "Nine Discourses for Times of Calamities"

in *The Ascetical Works, Volume XVII: Miscellany* (1890), pp. 354, 363-67

2.The Miserable State of Relapsing Sinners

I HOPE, my dear Christians, that, as Christ is risen, you have in this holy paschal time gone to confession, and have risen from your sins. But attend to what St. Jerome teaches - that many begin well, but few persevere. "Incipere multorum est, perseverare paucorum." Now the Holy Spirit declares that he who perseveres in holiness to death, and not they who begin a good life, shall be saved. "But he that shall persevere to the end, he shall be saved." (Matt. 24.13) The crown of Paradise, says St. Bernard, is promised to those who commence, but it is given only to those who persevere. "Inchoantibus premium promittitur, perseverantibus datur." (Serm. 6 De modo bene vivere) Since, then, brethren, you have resolved to give yourselves to God, listen to the admonition of the Holy Spirit : "Son, when you come to the service of God, stand in justice and in fear, and prepare yourself for temptation." (Ecclus. [Sirach] 2.1) Do not imagine that you shall have no more temptations, but prepare yourself for the combat, and guard against a relapse into the sins you have confessed; for, if you lose the grace of God again, you [153] shall find it difficult to recover it. I intend this day to show you the miserable state of relapsing sinners; that is, of those who, after confession, miserably fall back into the sins which they confessed.

Since, then, dearly beloved Christians, you have made a sincere confession of your sins, Jesus Christ says to you what he says to the paralytic : "Behold, you art made whole. Sin no more, lest some worse thing happen to you." (John 5.14) By the confessions which you have made your souls are healed, but not as yet saved; for, if you return to sin, you shall be again condemned to hell, and the injury caused by the relapse shall be far greater than that which you sustained from your former sins. "Audis," says St. Bernard, "recidere quam incidere, esse deterius." If a man recover from a mortal disease, and afterwards fall back into it, he shall have lost so much of his natural strength, that his recovery from the relapse will be impossible. This is precisely what will happen to relaxing sinners; returning to the vomit that is, taking back into the soul the sins vomited forth in confession they shall be so weak, that they will become objects of amusement to the devil. St. Anselm says that the devil acquires a certain dominion over them, so that he makes them fall, and fall again as he wishes. Hence the miserable beings become like birds with which a child amuses himself. He allows them, from time to time, to fly to a certain height, and then draws them back again when he pleases, by means of a cord held fast to them. Such is the manner in which the devil treats relapsing sinners. "Sed quia ab hoste tenentur, volantes in eadem vitia dejiciuntur." "But since by the enemy they are held fast, they are pulled down into the same vices."

2. St. Paul tells us that we have to contend not with men like ourselves, made of flesh and blood, but with the princes of hell. "Our wrestling is not against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers." (Eph. 7.12) By these words he wishes to admonish us that we have not strength to resist the powers of hell, and that, to resist them, the divine aid is absolutely necessary : without it, we shall be always defeated; but, with the assistance of God's grace, we shall, according to the same apostle, be able to do all things and [154] shall conquer all enemies. "I can do all things in him who strengthens me." (Phil. 4.13) But this assistance God gives only to those who pray for it. "Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and you shall find." (Matt. 7.7) They who neglect to ask, do not receive. Let us, then, be careful not to trust in our resolutions : if we place our confidence in them, we shall be lost. When we are tempted to relapse into sin, we must put our whole trust in the assistance of God, who infallibly hears all who invoke his aid.

3. "He that thinks himself to stand, let him take heed lest he fall." (1 Cor. 10.12) They who are in the state of grace should, according to St. Paul, be careful not to fall into sin, particularly if they have been ever guilty of mortal sins; for a relapse into sin brings greater evil on the soul. "And the last state of that man becomes worse than the first." (Luke 11.26)

4. We are told in the Holy Scriptures that the enemy "will offer victims to his seine, and will sacrifice to his net; because through them his meal is made sumptuous." (Habakkuk. 1.16) In explaining this passage St. Jerome says that the devil seeks to catch in his nets all men, in order to sacrifice them to the divine justice by their damnation. Sinners who are already in the net he endeavors to bind with new chains; but the friends of God are his "sumptuous meats." To make them his slaves, and to rob them of all they have acquired, he prepares stronger snares. "The more fervently," says Denis the Carthusian, "a soul endeavors to serve God, the more fiercely does the adversary rage against it." The closer the union of a Christian with God, and the greater his efforts to serve God, the more the enemy is armed with rage, and the more strenuously he labors to enter into the soul from which he has been expelled. "When," says the Redeemer, "the unclean spirit is gone out of a man, seeking rest, and not finding any, he says : I will return to my house from whence I came out." (Luke 11.24) Should he succeed in re-entering, he will not enter alone, but will bring with him associates to fortify himself in the soul of which he has again got possession. Thus, the second destruction of that miserable soul shall be greater than the first. "And the last [155] state of that man becomes worse than the first." (Luke 11.26)

5. To God, the relapse of ungrateful Christians is very displeasing. Because, after he had called and pardoned them with so much love, he sees that, forgetful of his mercies to them, they again turn their back upon him and renounce his grace. "If my enemy had reviled me, I would truly have borne with it. But you, a man of one mind, my guide and familiar, who did take sweet meats together with me." (Ps. 54.13, etc.) Had my enemy, says the Lord, insulted me, I would have felt less pain; but to see you rebel against me, after I had restored my friendship to you, and after I had made you sit at my table, to eat my own flesh, grieves me to the heart, and impels me to take vengeance on you. How miserable the man who, after having received so many graces from God, becomes the enemy, after being the friend of God. He shall find the sword of divine vengeance prepared to chastise him. "And he that passes over from justice to sin, God has prepared such a one for the sword." (Ecclus. 26.27)

6. Some of you may say : If I relapse, I will soon rise again; for I will immediately prepare myself for confession. To those who speak in this manner shall happen what befell Samson. He allowed himself to be deluded by Delilah : while he was asleep she cut off his hair, and his strength departed from him. Awaking from sleep, he said : "'I will go out as I did before, and shake myself,' not knowing that the Lord was departed from him." (Judges 16.20) He expected to deliver himself as on former occasions from the hands of the Philistines. But, because his strength had departed from him, he was made their slave. They gouged out his eyes, and binding him in chains, shut him up in prison. After relapsing into sin, a Christian loses the strength necessary to resist temptations, because "the Lord departs from him." He abandons him by withholding the efficacious aid necessary to overcome temptations; and the miserable man remains blind and abandoned in his sin.

7. "No man putting his hand to the plough, and [156] looking back is fit for the Kingdom of God." (Luke 9.62) Behold a faithful picture of a relapsing sinner. Mark the words no man : no one, says Jesus Christ, who begins to serve me, and looks back, is fit to enter heaven. According to Origen, the addition of a new sin to one committed before is like the addition of a new wound to a wound just inflicted. "Cum peccatum peccato adjicitur, sicut vulnus vulneri." (Hom. 1. in Ps.) If a wound be inflicted on any member of the body, that member certainly loses its original vigor. But, if it receives a second wound, it shall lose all strength and motion, without hope of recovery. The great evil of a relapse into sin is that it renders the soul so weak that it has but little strength to resist temptation. For St. Thomas says, "After a fault has been remitted, the dispositions produced by the preceding acts remain." (S. Theol. 1, q. 86, art. 5) Every sin, though pardoned, always leaves a wound on the soul. When to this wound a new one is added, the soul becomes so weak that, without a special and extraordinary grace from God, it is impossible for it to conquer temptations.

8. Let us, then, brethren, tremble at the thought of relapsing into sin, and let us beware of availing our selves of the mercy of God to continue to offend him. "He," says St. Augustine, "who has promised pardon to penitents, has promised repentance to no one." God has indeed promised pardon to all who repent of their sins, but he has not promised to any one the grace to repent of the faults which he has committed. Sorrow for sin is a pure gift of God; if he withholds it, how will you repent? And without repentance, how can you obtain pardon? Ah! the Lord will not allow himself to be mocked. "Be not deceived," says St. Paul, "God is not mocked." (Gal. 6.7) St. Isidore tells us that the man who repeats the sin which he before detested, is not a penitent, but a scoffer of God's majesty. "Irrisor, et non poenitens est, qui adhuc agit, quod poenitet." (De Summo Bono) And Tertullian teaches that where there is no amendment, repentance is not sincere. "Ubi emendatio nulla, poenitentia nulla." (De Poenitentia)

9. "Be penitent," said St. Peter in a discourse to the [157] Jews, "and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out." (Acts 3.19) Many repent, but are not converted. They feel a certain sorrow for the irregularities of their lives, but do not sincerely return to God. They go to confession, strike their breasts, and promise to amend; but they do not make a firm resolution to change their lives. They who resolve firmly on a change of life, persevere, or at least preserve themselves for a considerable time in the grace of God. But they who relapse into sin soon after confession show, as St. Peter says, that they repent, but are not converted; and such persons shall in the end die an unhappy death. "Plerumque," says St. Gregory, "mali sic compunguntur ad justitiam, sicut plerumque boni tentantur ad culpam." (Pastor., p. 3, admon. 31) (As the just have frequent temptations to sin, but yield not to them, because their will abhors them, so sinners feel certain impulses to virtue; but these are not sufficient to produce a true conversion.) The Wise Man tells us that mercy shall be shown to him who confesses his sins and abandons them, but not to those who merely confess their transgressions. "He that shall confess his sins and forsake them, shall obtain mercy." (Prov. 28.13) He, then, who does not give up, but returns to sin after confession, shall not obtain mercy from God, but shall die a victim of divine justice. He may expect to die the death of a certain young Englishman, who, as is related in the history of England, was in the habit of relapsing into sins against purity. He always fell back into these sins after confession. At the hour of death he confessed his sins, and died in a manner which gave reason to hope for his salvation. But, while a holy priest was celebrating or preparing to celebrate Mass for his departed soul, the miserable young man appeared to him, and said that he was damned. He added that, at the point of death, being tempted to indulge a bad thought, he felt

himself as it were forced to consent, and, as he was accustomed to do in the former part of his life, he yielded to the temptation, and thus was lost.

10. Is there then no means of salvation for relapsing sinners? I do not say this; but I adopt the maxim of [158] physicians: "In magnis morbis a magnis initium medendi sumere oportet." "In malignant diseases, powerful remedies are necessary." To return to the way of salvation, the relapsing sinner must do great violence to himself. "The kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent bear it away." (Matt. 11.12) In the beginning of a new life, the relapsing sinner must do violence to himself in order to root out the bad habits which he has contracted, and to acquire habits of virtue; for when he has acquired habits of virtue, the observance of the divine commands shall become easy and even sweet. The Lord once said to St. Bridget that to those who bear with fortitude the first punctures of the thorns which they experience in the attacks of the senses, in avoiding occasions of sin, and in withdrawing from dangerous conversations, these thorns are by degrees changed into roses (Rev. Bk. 1, ch. 15).

11. But, to use the necessary violence, and to lead a life of regularity, you must adopt the proper means; otherwise you shall do nothing. After rising in the morning, you must make acts of thanksgiving, of the love of God, and of offering of the actions of the day. You must also renew your resolution never to offend God, and beg of Jesus Christ and his holy mother to preserve you from sin during the day. Afterwards make your meditation and assist at Mass. During the day make a spiritual reading and a visit to the most holy sacrament. In the evening, say the Rosary and make an examination of conscience. Receive holy communion at least once a week, or more frequently if your directors advise you. Be careful to choose a confessor, to whom you will regularly go to confession. It is also very useful to make a spiritual retreat every year in some religious house. Honor the mother of God every day by some particular devotion, and by fasting on every Saturday. She is the mother of perseverance, and promises to obtain it for all who serve her. "They that work by me shall not sin." (Ecclus. 24.30) Above all, it is necessary to ask of God every morning the gift of perseverance, and to beg of the Blessed Virgin to obtain it for you, and particularly in the time of temptation, by invoking the name of Jesus and Mary as [159] long as the temptation lasts. Happy the man who will continue to act in this manner, and shall he found so doing when Jesus Christ shall come to judge him. "Blessed is that servant whom, when his Lord shall come, he shall find so doing." (Matt. 24.46)

3. Avoiding the Occasions of Sin

"When the doors were shut, where the disciples were gathered together for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in the midst." (John 20.19)

WE find in this day's gospel that after his resurrection Jesus Christ entered, though the doors were closed, into the house in which the apostles were assembled, and stood in the midst of them. St. Thomas says that the mystical meaning of this miracle is that the Lord does not enter into our souls unless we keep the door of the senses shut. "Mistica per hoc datur intelligi, quod Christus nobis apparet quando fores, id est sensus exteriores sunt clausi." (On John, 20, 4) If, then, we wish Jesus Christ to dwell within us, we must keep the doors of our senses closed against dangerous occasions, otherwise the devil will make us his slaves. I will show today the great danger of perdition to which they who do not avoid the occasions of sin expose themselves.

1. We read in the Scriptures that Christ and Lazarus arose from the dead. Christ rose to die no more: "Christ rising from the dead, dies no more." (Rom. 6. 9); but Lazarus arose and died again. The Abbot Gueric remarks that Christ arose free and unbound; "but Lazarus came forth bound feet and hands." (John 11.44) Miserable the man, adds this author, who rises from sin bound by any dangerous occasion : he will die again by losing the divine grace. He, then, who wishes to save his soul, must not only abandon sin, but also the occasions of sin : that is, he must renounce such an intimacy, such a house; he must renounce those wicked companions, and all similar occasions that incite him to sin.

[160] 2. In consequence of original sin, we all have an inclination to do what is forbidden. Hence St. Paul complained that he experienced in himself a law opposed to reason : "But I see another law in my members, fighting against the law of my mind, and captivating me in the law of sin." (Rom. 7.23) Now, when a dangerous occasion is present, it violently excites our corrupt desires, so that it is then very difficult to resist them : because God withholds efficacious helps from those who voluntarily expose themselves to the occasion of sin. "He that loves danger shall perish in it." (Ecclus. 3.27) "When," says St. Thomas, in his comment on this passage, "we expose ourselves to danger, God abandons us in it." St. Bernardine of Siena teaches that the counsel of avoiding the occasions of sin is the best of all counsel, and as it were the foundation of religion. "Inter consilia Christi unum celeberrimum, et quasi religiosi fundamentum est, fugere peccatorum occasiones."

3. St. Peter says that "the devil goes about seeking whom he may devour." (1 Pet. 5.8) He is constantly going about our souls, endeavoring to enter and take possession of them. Hence, he seeks to place before us the occasions of sin, by which he enters the soul. "Explorat," says St. Cyprian, "an sit pars cujus aditu penetret." When the soul yields to the suggestions of the devil, and exposes itself to the occasions of sin, he easily enters and devours it. The ruin of our first parents arose from their not flying from the occasions of sin. God had prohibited them not only to eat, but even to touch the forbidden apple. In answer to the serpent tempting her, Eve said: "God has commanded us that we should not eat, and that we should not touch it." (Gen. 3.3) But "she saw, took, and ate" the forbidden fruit : she first looked at it, she then took it into her hands, and afterwards ate it. This is what ordinarily happens to all who expose themselves to the occasions of sin. Hence, being once compelled by exorcisms to tell the sermon which displeased him most, the devil confessed that it was the sermon on avoiding the occasions of sin. As long as we expose ourselves to the occasions of sin, the devil laughs at all [161] our good purposes and promises made to God. The greatest care of the enemy is to induce us not to avoid evil occasions; for these occasions, like a veil placed before the eyes, prevent us from seeing either the lights received from God, or the eternal truths, or the resolutions we have made : in a word, they make us forget all, and as it were force us into sin.

4. "Know it to be a communication with death; for you are going in the midst of snares." (Ecclus. 9.20) Everyone born in this world enters into the midst of snares. Hence, the Wise Man advises those who wish to be secure to guard themselves against the snares of the world, and to withdraw from them. "He that is aware of the snares shall be secure." (Prov. 11.15) But if, instead of withdrawing from them, a Christian approaches them, how can he avoid being caught by them? Hence, after having with so much loss learned the danger of exposing himself to the danger of sin, David said that, to continue faithful to God, he kept at a distance from every occasion which could lead

him to relapse. "I have restrained my feet from every evil way, that I may keep your words." (Ps. 118.101) He does not say from every sin, but from every evil way which conducts to sin. The devil is careful to find pretexts to make us believe that certain occasions to which we expose ourselves are not voluntary, but necessary. When the occasion in which we are placed is really necessary, the Lord always helps us to avoid sin; but we sometimes imagine certain necessities which are not sufficient to excuse us. "A treasure is never safe," says St. Cyprian, "as long as a robber is harbored within; nor is a lamb secure while it dwells in the same den with a wolf." (Lib. de Sing. Cler.) The saint speaks against those who do not wish to remove the occasions of sin, and still say: "I am not afraid that I shall fall." As no one can be secure of his treasure if he keeps a thief in his house, and as a lamb cannot be sure of its life if it remain in the den of a wolf, so likewise no one can be secure of the treasure of divine grace if he is resolved to continue in the occasion of sin. St. James teaches that every man has within himself a powerful enemy, that is, his own evil inclinations, which tempt [162] him to sin. "Every man is tempted by his own concupiscence, drawn away, and allured." (James 1.14) If, then, we do not fly from the external occasions, how can we resist temptation and avoid sin? Let us, therefore, place before our eyes the general remedy which Jesus has prescribed for conquering temptations and saving our souls. "If your right eye scandalize you, pluck it out and cast it from you." (Matt. 5.29) If you find that your right eye is to you a cause of damnation, you must pull it out and cast it far from you; that is, when there is danger of losing your soul, you must fly from all evil occasions. St. Francis of Assisi used to say, as I have stated in another sermon, that the devil does not seek, in the beginning, to bind timorous souls with the chain of mortal sin; because they would be alarmed at the thought of committing mortal sin, and would fly from it with horror : he endeavors to bind them by a single hair, which does not excite much fear; because by this means he will succeed more easily in strengthening their bonds, till he makes them his slaves. Hence he who wishes to be free from the danger of being the slave of hell must break all the hairs by which the enemy attempts to bind him; that is, he must avoid all occasions of sin, such as certain manners of speech, places, little presents, and words of affection. With regard to those who have had a habit of impurity, it will not be sufficient to avoid proximate (near) occasions; if they do not fly from remote occasions, they will very easily relapse into their former sins.

5. Impurity, says St. Augustine, is a vice which makes war on all, and which few conquer. "The fight is common, but the victory rare." How many miserable souls have entered the contest with this vice, and have been defeated! But to induce you to expose yourselves to occasions of this sin, the devil will tell you not to be afraid of being overcome by the temptation. "I do not wish," says St. Jerome, "to fight with the hope of victory, lest I should sometimes lose the victory." I will not expose myself to the combat with the hope of conquering; because, by voluntarily engaging in the fight, I shall lose my soul and my God. To escape defeat in this struggle, a great grace of God is necessary; [163] and to render ourselves worthy of this grace, we must, on our part, avoid the occasions of sin. To practice the virtue of chastity, it is necessary to recommend ourselves continually to God : we have not strength to preserve it; that strength must be the gift of God. "And as I knew," says the Wise Man, "that I could not otherwise be continent, except God gave it, ... I went to the Lord, and besought him." (Wis. 8.21) But if we expose ourselves to the occasions of sin, we ourselves shall provide our rebellious flesh with arms to make war against the soul. "Neither," says the Apostle, "yield your members as instruments of sin unto iniquity." (Rom. 6.13) In explaining this passage, St. Cyril of Alexandria says : "You stimulate the flesh; you arm it, and make it powerful

against the spirit." St. Philip Neri used to say that in the war against the vice of impurity, the victory is gained by cowards - that is, by those who fly from the occasions of this sin. But the man who exposes himself to it, arms his flesh, and renders it so powerful, that it will be morally impossible for him to resist its attacks.

6. "Cry out," says the Lord to Isaiah, "all flesh is grass." (Isa. 40.6) Now, says St. John Chrysostom, if all flesh is grass, it is as foolish for a man who exposes himself to the occasion of sin to hope to preserve the virtue of purity, as to expect that hay, into which a torch has been thrown, will not catch fire. "Put a torch into hay, and then dare to deny that the hay will burn." No, says St. Cyprian; it is impossible to stand in the midst of flames, and not to burn. "Impossibile est flammis circumdari et non ardere." (De Sing. Cler.) "Can a man," says the Holy Spirit, "hide fire in his bosom, and his garments not burn? or can he walk upon hot coals, and his feet not be burnt?" (Prov. 6.27, 28) Not to be burnt in such circumstances would be a miracle. St. Bernard teaches that to preserve chastity, and, at the same time, to expose oneself to the proximate occasion of sin, "is a greater miracle than to raise a dead man to life."

7. In explaining the fifth Psalm, St. Augustine says that "he who is unwilling to fly from danger, wishes to perish in it." Hence, in another place, he exhorts those who wish to conquer, and not to perish, to avoid [164] dangerous occasions. "In the occasion of falling into sin, take flight, if you desire to gain the victory." (Serm. 250 de temp.) Some foolishly trust in their own strength, and do not see that their strength is like that of flax placed in the fire. "And your strength shall be as the ashes of tow." (Isa. 1.31) Others, trusting in the change which has taken place in their life, in their confessions, and in the promises they have made to God, say : Through the grace of the Lord, I have now no bad motive in seeking the company of such a person; her presence is not even an occasion of temptations : Listen, all you who speak in this manner. In Mauritania there are bears that go in quest of the apes, to feed upon them : as soon as a bear appears, the apes run up the trees, and thus save themselves. But what does the bear do? He stretches himself on the ground as if dead, and waits till the apes descend from the trees. The moment he sees that they have descended, he springs up, seizes on them, and devours them. It is thus the devil acts : he makes the temptation appear to be dead; but when a soul descends, and exposes itself to the occasion of sin, he stirs up temptation, and devours it. Oh! how many miserable souls, devoted to spiritual things, to mental prayer, to frequent communion, and to a life of holiness have, by exposing themselves to the occasion of sin, become the slaves of the devil! We find in ecclesiastical history that a holy woman, who employed herself in the pious office of burying the martyrs, once found among them one who was not as yet dead. She brought him into her own house, and procured a physician and medicine for him, till he recovered. But, what happened? These two saints (as they might be called - one of them on the point of being a martyr, the other devoting her time to works of mercy with so much risk of being persecuted by the tyrants) first fell into sin and lost the grace of God, and, becoming weaker by sin, afterwards denied the faith. St. Macarius relates a similar fact regarding an old man who suffered to be half-burned in defense of the faith; but, being brought back into prison he, unfortunately for himself, formed an intimacy with a devout woman who served the martyrs, and fell into sin.

[165] 8. The Holy Spirit tells us that we must fly from sin as from a serpent. "Flee from sin as from the face of a serpent." (Ecclus. 21.2) Hence, as we not only avoid the bite of a serpent, but are careful neither to touch nor approach it, so we must fly not only from sin, but also from the occasion of sin - that is, from the house, the conversation, the

person that would lead us to sin. St. Isidore says that he who wishes to remain near a serpent, will not remain long unhurt. "Juxta serpentem positus non erit sin illaesus." (Solit., Bk. 2) Hence, if any person is likely to prove an occasion of your ruin, the admonition of the Wise Man is, "Remove your way far from her, and come not near the doors of her house." (Prov. 5.8) He not only tells you not to enter the house which has been to you a road to hell ("Her house is the way to hell." Prov. 7.27); but he also cautions you not to approach it, and even to keep at a distance from it. "Remove your way far from her." But, you will say, if I abandon that house, my temporal affairs shall suffer. It is better that you should suffer a temporal loss, than that you should lose your soul and your God. You must be persuaded that, in whatever regards chastity, there cannot be too great caution. If we wish to save our souls from sin and hell, we must always fear and tremble. "With fear and trembling work out your salvation." (Phil. 2.12) He who is not fearful, but exposes himself to occasions of sin, shall scarcely be saved. Hence, in our prayers we ought to say every day, and several times in the day, that petition of the Our Father, "and lead us not into temptation." Lord, do not permit me to be attacked by those temptations which would deprive me of your grace. We cannot merit the grace of perseverance; but, according to St. Augustine, God grants it to every one that asks it, because he has promised to hear all who pray to him. Hence, the holy doctor says that the Lord, "by his promises has made himself a debtor."

4. Scandal

[166] "The wolf catches and scatters the sheep." (John 10.12)

THE wolves that catch and scatter the sheep of Jesus Christ are the authors of scandal, who, not content with their own destruction, labor to destroy others. But the Lord says : "Woe to that man by whom the scandal comes." (Matt. 18.7) Woe to him who gives scandal, and causes others to lose the grace of God. Origen says that "a person who impels another to sin, sins more grievously than the other." If, brethren, there be any among you who has given scandal, I will endeavor this day to convince him of the evil he has done, that he may bewail it and guard against it for the future. I will show, in the first point, the great displeasure which the sin of scandal gives to God; and, in the second, the great punishment which God threatens to inflict on the authors of scandal.

First Point. On the great displeasure which the sin of scandal gives to God.

1. It is, in the first place, necessary to explain what is meant by scandal. Behold how St. Thomas defines it : "Scandal is a word or act which gives occasion to the ruin of one's neighbor." (S. Theol. 2-2, q. 45, art. 1) Scandal, then, is a word or act by which you are to your neighbor the cause or occasion of losing his soul. It may be direct or indirect. It is direct when you directly tempt or induce another to commit sin. It is indirect when, although you foresee that sinful words or actions will be the cause of sin to another, you do not abstain from them. But scandal, whether it be direct or indirect, if it be in a matter of great importance, is always a mortal sin.

2. Let us now see the great displeasure which the destruction of a neighbor's soul gives to God. To understand it, we must consider how dear every soul is [167] to God. He has created the souls of all men in his own image. "Let us make man in our image and likeness." (Gen. 1.26) Other creatures God has made by a fiat - by an act of his will; but the soul of man he has created by his own breath. "And the Lord breathed into his face the breath of life." (Gen. 2.7) The soul of your neighbor God has loved for eternity. "I

have loved you with an everlasting love." (Jer. 31.3) He has, moreover, created every soul to be crowned in Paradise, and to be a partner in his glory. "That by these you may be made partakers of the divine nature." (2 Peter 2.4) In heaven he will make the souls of the saints partakers of his own joy. "Enter into the joy of your Lord." (Matt. 25.21. To them he shall give himself as their reward. "I am your reward exceedingly great." (Gen. 15.1)

3. But nothing can show the value which God sets on the souls of men more clearly than what the Incarnate Word has done for their redemption from sin and hell. "If," says St. Eucharis, "you do not believe your Creator, ask your Redeemer, how precious you are." Speaking of the care which we ought to have of our brethren, St. Ambrose says : "The great value of the salvation of a brother is known from the death of Christ." We judge of the value of everything by the price paid for it by an intelligent purchaser. Now, Jesus Christ has, according to the Apostle, purchased the souls of men with his own blood. "You are bought with a great price." (1 Cor. 6.20) We can, then, say that the soul is of as much value as the blood of a God. Such, indeed, is the language of St. Hilary. "Tam copioso munere redemptio agitur, ut homo Deum valere videatur." Hence, the Savior tells us that whatever good or evil we do to the least of his brethren, we do to himself. "So long as you did it to one of these my least brethren, you did it to me." (Matt. 25.40)

4. From all this we may infer how great is the displeasure given to God by scandalizing a brother, and destroying his soul. It is enough to say that they who give scandal rob God of a child, and murder a soul, for whose salvation he has spent his blood and his life. [168] Hence, St. Leo calls the authors of scandals murderers. "Quisquis scandalizat, mortem infert animae proximi." They are the most impious of murderers; because they kill not the body, but the soul of a brother, and rob Jesus Christ of all his tears, of his sorrows, and of all that he has done and suffered to gain that soul. Hence the Apostle says : "Now, when you sin thus against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ." (1 Cor. 8.12) They who scandalize a brother, sin against Christ; because, as St. Ambrose says, they deprive him of a soul for which he has spent so many years, and submitted to so many toils and labors. It is related that St. Albert the Great spent thirty years in making a head, which resembled the human head, and uttered words: and that St. Thomas, fearing that it was done by the agency of the devil, took the head and broke it. St. Albert complained of the act of St. Thomas, saying: "You have broken of mine the work of thirty years." I do not assert that this is true; but it is certain that, when Jesus Christ sees a soul destroyed by scandal, he can reprove the author of it, and say to him : Wicked wretch, what have you done? You have deprived me of this soul, for which I have labored thirty-three years.

5. We read in the Scriptures that the sons of Jacob, after having sold their brother Joseph to certain merchants, told his father that wild beasts had devoured him. "Fera pessima devoravit eum." (Gen. 37.20) To convince their father of the truth of what they said, they dipped the coat of Joseph in the blood of a goat, and presented it to him, saying: "See whether this be your son's coat or not" (v. 32). In reply, the afflicted father said with tears : "It is my son's coat : an evil wild beast has eaten him" (v. 33). Thus, we may imagine that, when a soul is brought into sin by scandal, the devils present to God the garment of that soul dipped in the blood of the Immaculate Lamb, Jesus Christ - that is, the grace lost by that scandalized soul, which Jesus Christ had purchased with his blood and that they say to the Lord : "See whether this be your son's coat or not." If God were capable of shedding [169] tears, he would weep more bitterly than Jacob did, at the

sight of that lost soul - his murdered child - and would say : "It is my son's coat : an evil wild beast has eaten him." The Lord will go in search of this wild beast, saying : "Where is the beast? where is the beast that has devoured my child?" When he finds the wild beast, what shall he do with him?

6. "I will," says the Lord by his prophet Hosea, "meet them as a bear that is robbed of her whelps." (Hosea 13.8) When the bear comes to her den, and finds not her whelps, she goes about the wood in search of the person who took them away. When she discovers the person, oh! with what fury does she rush upon him! It is thus the Lord shall rush upon the authors of scandal, who have robbed him of his children. Those who have given scandal will say : My neighbor is already damned; how can I repair the evil that has been done? The Lord shall answer: Since you have been the cause of his perdition, you must pay me for the loss of his soul. "I will require his blood at your hands." (Ezek. 3.20) It is written in Deuteronomy, "You shall not pity him, but shall require life for life" (19.21). You have destroyed a soul; you must suffer the loss of your own. Let us pass to the second point.

Second Point. The great punishment which God threatens to those who give scandal.

7. "Woe to that man by whom the scandal comes." (Matt. 18.7) If the displeasure given to God by scandal be great, the chastisement which awaits the authors of it must be frightful. Behold how Jesus Christ speaks of this chastisement : "But he that shall scandalize one of these little ones that believe in me, it were better for him that a mill-stone should be hanged about his neck, and that he should be drowned in the depth of the sea." (Matt. 18.6) If a malefactor dies on the scaffold, he excites the compassion of the spectators, who at least pray for him, if they cannot deliver him from death. But, were he cast into the depths of the sea, there would be no one present to pity his fate. A certain author says that Jesus Christ threatens the person [170] who scandalizes a brother with this sort of punishment, to signify that he is so hateful to the angels and saints, that they do not wish to recommend to God the man who has brought a soul to perdition. "He is declared unworthy not only to be assisted, but even to be seen." (Mansi. ch. 3, no. 4)

8. St. John Chrysostom says that scandal is so abominable in the eyes of God, that though he overlooks very grievous sins, he cannot allow the sin of scandal to pass without adequate punishment. "Tam Deo horribile est scandalum, ut peccata graviora dissimulet non autem peccata ubi frater scandalizatur." God himself says the same by the prophet Ezekiel : "Every man of the house of Israel, if he ... set up the stumbling block of his iniquity ... I will make him an example and a proverb, and will cut him off from the midst of my people." (Ezek. 14.7, 8) And, in reality, scandal is one of the sins which we find in the sacred Scriptures punished by God with the greatest rigor. Of Eli, because he did not correct his sons, who gave scandal by stealing the flesh offered in sacrifice (for parents give scandal, not only by giving bad example, but also by not correcting their children as they ought), the Lord said : "Behold, I do a thing in Israel : and whosoever shall hear it, both his ears shall tingle." (1 Sam. 3.11) And speaking of the scandal given by the sons of Eli, the inspired writer says: "Wherefore the sin of the young men was exceedingly great before the Lord." (Ibid. 2.17) What was this exceedingly great sin? It was, says St. Gregory, in explaining this passage, drawing others to sin. "Quia ad peccandum alios pertrahebant." Why was Jeroboam chastised? Because he scandalized the people : he "has sinned, and made Israel sin." (1 Kings 14.16) In the family of Ahab, all the members of which were the enemies of God,

Jezebel was the most severely chastised. She was thrown down from a window, and devoured by dogs, so that nothing remained but her "skull, and the feet, and the extremities of her hands." And why was she so severely punished? Because "she set Ahab on to every evil."

9. For the sin of scandal hell was created. "In the [171] beginning God created heaven and earth." (Gen. 1.1) But, when did he create hell? It was when Lucifer began to seduce the angels into rebellion against God. Lest he should continue to pervert those who remained faithful to God, he was banished from heaven immediately after his sin. Hence Jesus Christ said to the Pharisees, who by their bad example scandalized the people, that they were children of the devil, who was from the beginning a murderer of souls. "You are of your father, the devil : he was a murderer from the beginning." (John 8.44) And when St. Peter gave scandal to Jesus Christ, by suggesting to him not to allow his life to be taken away by the Jews, and thus endeavoring to prevent the accomplishment of redemption, the Redeemer called him a devil. "Go behind me, Satan; you are a scandal to me." (Matt. 16.23) And, in reality, what other office do the authors of scandal perform, than that of a minister of the devil? If he were not assisted by such impious ministers, he certainly would not succeed in gaining so many souls. A scandalous companion does more injury than a hundred devils.

10. On the words of Hezekiah, "Behold, in peace is my bitterness most bitter" (Isa. 38.17), St. Bernard, in the name of the Church, says : "Peace from pagans, peace from heretics, but no peace from children." At present the Church is not persecuted by idolaters, or by heretics, but she is persecuted by scandalous Christians, who are her own children. In catching birds, we employ decoys, that is, certain birds that are blinded, and tied in such manner that they cannot fly away. It is thus the devil acts. "When," says St. Ephrem, "a soul has been taken, it becomes a snare to deceive others." After having made a young man fall into sin, the enemy first blinds him as his own slave, and then makes him his decoy to deceive others; and to draw them into the net of sin, he not only impels, but even forces him to deceive others. "The enemy," says St. Leo, "has many whom he compels to deceive others." (Serm. de Nativ.)

11. Miserable wretches! the authors of scandal must suffer in hell the punishment of all the sins they have [172] made others commit. Cesarius relates (Bk. 2, ch. 6) that, after the death of a certain person who had given scandal, a holy man witnessed his judgment and condemnation, and saw that, at his arrival at the gate of hell, all the souls whom he had scandalized came to meet him, and said to him : Come, accursed wretch, and atone for all the sins which you have made us commit. They then rushed in upon him, and like so many wild beasts, began to tear him in pieces. St. Bernard says that, in speaking of other sinners, the Scriptures hold out hopes of amendment and pardon; but they speak of those who give scandal as persons separated from God, of whose salvation there is very little hope. "Loquitur tanquam a Deo separati, unde hisce nulla spes vitae esse poterit."

12. Behold, then, the miserable state of those who give scandal by their bad example, who utter immodest words before their companions, in the presence of young females, and even of innocent children, who, in consequence of hearing those words, commit a thousand sins. Considering how the angel-guardians of those little ones weep at seeing them in the state of sin, and how they call for vengeance from God against the sacrilegious tongues that have scandalized them. A great chastisement awaits all who ridicule those who practice virtue. For many, through fear of the contempt and ridicule of

others, abandon virtue, and give themselves up to a wicked life. What shall be the punishment of those who send messages to induce others to sin? or of those who boast of their own wicked actions? God! instead of weeping and repenting for having offended the Lord, they rejoice and glory in their iniquities! Some advise others to commit sin; others induce them to it; and some, worse than the devils, teach others how to sin. What shall we say of fathers and mothers, who, though it is in their power to prevent the sins of their children, allow them to associate with bad companions, or to frequent certain dangerous houses, and permit their daughters to hold conversations with young men? Oh! with what scourges shall we see such persons chastised on the day of judgment!

13. Perhaps some father of a family among you will [173] say : Then, I am lost because I have given scandal? Is there no hope of salvation for me? No : I will not say that you are past hope - the mercy of God is great. He has promised pardon to all who repent. But, if you wish to save your soul, you must repair the scandal you have given. "Let him," says Eusebius Emmissenus, "who has destroyed himself by the destruction of many, redeem himself by the edification of many." (Hom. 10 ad Mon.) You have lost your soul, and have destroyed the souls of many by your scandals. You are now bound to repair the evil. As you have until now drawn others to sin, so you are bound to draw them to virtue by words of edification, by good example, by avoiding sinful occasions, by frequenting the sacraments, by going often to the church to pray, and by attending sermons. And from this day forward avoid, as you would death, every act and word which could scandalize others. "Let their own ruin," says St. Cyprian, "suffice for those who have fallen." (Bk. 1, L. 3) And St. Thomas of Villanova says: "Let your own sins be sufficient for you." What evil has Jesus Christ done to you that it is not enough for you to have offended him yourselves, but you wish to make others offend him? This is an excess of cruelty.

14. Be careful, then, never again to give the smallest scandal. And if you wish to save your soul, avoid as much as possible those who give scandal. These incarnate devils shall be damned; but, if you do not avoid them, you will bring yourself to perdition. "Woe to the world because of scandals," says the Lord (Matt. 18.7), that is, many are lost because they do not fly from occasions of scandal. But you may say : Such a person is my friend; I am under obligations to him; I expect many favors from him. But Jesus Christ says : "If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you. It is better for you, having one eye, to enter into life, than, having two eyes, to be cast into hell fire." (Matt. 18.9) Although a certain person was your right eye, you must withdraw for ever from her; it is better for you to lose an eye and save your soul, than to preserve it and be cast into hell.

Sermons (nn. 2-4) taken from *Ascetical Works, Volume XVI: Sermons for all Sundays in the Year* (1882) pp. 152-173.

Appendix: Our Lady of Fatima, Hell, and Sins Against Chastity

1. The vision of hell was shown to the three Fatima children, Lucia, Francisco, and Jacinta on July 13, 1917 to impress upon men and to confirm the doctrine of Hell; thereby influencing man to stop offending God by sin. On that day the Blessed Virgin unveiled a terrifying reality before the children's eyes: "Our Lady showed us a great sea of fire, which seemed to be under the earth. Plunged in this fire were demons and souls, in human form, like transparent burning embers, all blackened or burnished bronze, floating about in this conflagration in clouds of smoke, lifted by flames coming out of their

bodies. They rose and fell on all sides, like sparks in roaring fires, without weight or direction, amid shrieks and groans of pain and despair that terrified us and made us tremble with fear. The demons could be distinguished by their terrifying and repellent likeness to frightful and unknown animals, black and transparent like burning coals. This vision lasted but a moment, thanks to our good Mother from Heaven who had warned us beforehand, and promised to take us to Heaven. Otherwise, I think we would have died of horror and fear. Then we raised our eyes to Our Lady, who said with kindness and sadness: 'You have seen Hell, where the souls of poor sinners go. To save them, God wishes to establish in the world devotion to My Immaculate Heart. If people do what I am going to tell you, many souls will be saved and there will be peace.'

Our Lady further said, "Pray, pray a great deal and make many sacrifices, for many souls go to Hell because they have no one to make sacrifices and to pray for them." The existence of Hell arouses disputes. Sister Lucia wrote, a few years before her death on February 13, 2005: "There is no shortage of unbelievers in the world who deny these truths, but they are no less true for being denied. Their disbelief does not save unbelievers from the horrors of Hell, should a life of sin lead them there. ... At Fatima, (God) sent us His Message as one more proof of these truths. This Message recalls them to us, so that we do not let ourselves be fooled by the false doctrines of unbelievers who deny them, or of deceivers who distort them. To this end, the Message assures us that Hell is a fact, and that the souls of poor sinners end up there." (*Calls from the Message of Fatima* (2003), ch. 14)

2. The Blessed Virgin Mary appeared to the Fatima visionary Jacinta Marto several times between December 1919 and February 1920. Our Lady told her many things including:

"More souls go to Hell because of sins of the flesh than for any other reason."[1]
"Certain fashions will be introduced that will offend Our Lord very much." "Woe to women lacking in modesty."[2]

"The Mother of God wants more virgin souls bound by the vow of chastity."

"Many marriages are not of God and do not please Our Lord."

. Of the three children who saw hell, Jacinta was the most affected by this vision. The following are some of her words on hell.

"Oh, Hell! Oh, Hell!" "Mother of God have pity on those who do not amend their lives." **"If men only know what eternity is, they would do everything in their power to change their lives."**

Often she would say to her brother, "Francisco, are you praying with me? We must pray very much to save souls from hell, so many go there. So many!"

At times she would ask of Lucia, "Why doesn't Our Lady show Hell to sinners? If only they saw it, they would never commit sins again."

Finally she said, "Look, I am going to heaven soon but you are to stay here. If Our Lady lets you, tell everyone what hell is like so that they won't sin anymore and not go there."

3. The following is a rare interview with Sister Lucia, the Fatima visionary who died in 2005, by Father Lombardi. It was recorded in the Vatican weekly "Osservatore della Domenica" February 7, 1954.

Fr. Lombardi: "Tell me, is the 'Better World Movement' a response of the Church to the words spoken by Our Lady?"

Lucia: "Father, there is certainly a great need for this renewal. If it is not done, and taking into account the present development of humanity, **only a limited number of the**

human race will be saved."

Fr. Lombardi: "Do you really believe that many will go to Hell? I hope that God will save the greater part of humanity." [He had just written a book entitled *Salvation for Those Without Faith*.]

Lucia: "Father, **many will be lost.**"

Fr. Lombardi: "It is true that the world is full of evil, but there is always a hope of salvation."

Lucia: "No Father, **many will be lost.**"

Father Lombardi remembered that Lucia had seen Hell and added: "Her words disturbed me. I returned to Italy with that grave warning impressed on my heart." [3]

Notes

1. "More souls go to Hell because of sins of the flesh than for any other reason." Sr Lucia, the last living Fatima seer, said this refers primarily to sins against chastity, also called sins of impurity, such as fornication, masturbation, adultery, homosexual behavior. The reason for this statement is not because sins against chastity are the most *grievous* sins, but the *most common* and, as Sr Lucia stated, "because of conscience," since sins of impurity are less likely to be repented of than other sins. Why? 1) because the sense of injustice committed, which is the primary stimulus to repent of one's sins, is oftentimes not strongly felt when engaging in them, with the exception of adultery; 2) there is a greater sense of shame when committing certain impure acts and hence greater difficulty confessing them in the sacrament of confession, or even repenting of them in one's heart; 3) sexual activity of all kinds is presented by our post-Christian -- even anti-Christian -- popular culture as natural and good, and sexual abstinence is even taught to be unhealthy. The sixth commandment, relating to chastity, has always been called "the difficult commandment." Today, with pornography everywhere and women and girls dressing more immodestly than ever, it can almost be called "the impossible commandment." However, Jesus assures us: "What is impossible with men is possible with God." (Lk 18:27) We may add that all who invoke the Blessed Virgin Mary for help in overcoming sins of impurity will receive the grace to do so, as she herself has revealed to St Bridget of Sweden and various other saints. And those who strive to live chaste lives know from experience that when sins of impurity are humbly repented of and confessed, a great burden is removed from our consciences, and we experience that peace of soul which the world and carnal indulgence cannot give.

2. Jacinta, before she died, said Our Lady had told her that certain fashions would be introduced that would greatly offend Our Lord, who had said in the gospel, "every one who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Mt 5.28). Saint John Chrysostom instructed women of all times about dress when in the fourth century he declared: "You carry your snare everywhere and spread your nets in all places. You allege that you never invited others to sin. You did not, indeed, by your words, but you have done so by your dress and your deportment.... When you have made another sin in his heart, how can you be innocent? Tell me, whom does this world condemn? Whom do judges punish? Those who drink poison or those who prepare it and administer the fatal potion? You have prepared the abominable cup, you have given the death dealing drink, and you are more criminal than are those who

poison the body; you murder not the body but the soul. And it is not to enemies you do this, nor are you urged on by any imaginary necessity, nor provoked by injury, but out of foolish vanity and pride." The late Father Bernard A. Kunkel, a great defender of modesty and decency, said concerning the words of Our Lady of Fatima: "She knew that...forces of evil would design these fashions, together with the filthy literature...movies and television shows...all as part of their program to break down morality, especially among the young people. Our Lady was only exposing this plan."

3. Francis Johnston, *Fatima, The Great Sign* (Rockford, IL: Tan Publishers, Inc., 1980) p. 36. For more information see www.wafusa.org. Sr. Lucia's highly acclaimed book, *Calls from the Message of Fatima* (2003), which she wrote in obedience to her spiritual director and which explains Our Lady's message as it especially applies to us today, can be obtained at www.rosary-center.org.