The Convocation Sermon of Doctor John Colet Made at St. Paul’s [1510]

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Ye are come together today, fathers and right-wise men, to enter council, in the which, what ye will do, and what matters ye will handle, yet we understand not. But we wish that once, remembering your name and profession, ye would mind the reformation of the churches matter. For it was never more need, and the state of the Church did never desire more your endeavors. For the spouse of Christ, the Church, whom ye would should be without spot or wrinkle, is made foul and evil-favored, as saith Isaiah, “The faithful city is made a harlot.” And as saith Jeremiah, she hath done lechery with many lovers, whereby she hath conceived many seeds of wickedness, and daily bringeth forth very foul fruit.

Wherefore I came hither today, fathers, to warn you that in this your council, with all your mind, ye think upon the reformation of the Church. But forsooth I came not willingly, for I knew mine unworthiness. I saw besides how hard it was to please the precise judgment of so many men. For I judged it utterly unworthy and unmeet, yea and almost too malapert, that I, a servant, should counsel my lords; that I, a son, should teach you, my fathers. Truly it had been meeter for some one of the fathers—that is to say, you prelates—might have done it with more grave authority and greater wisdom. But the commandment was to be obeyed of the most reverend father and lord the Archbishop, president of this council, which laid upon me this burden, truly too heavy for me. We read that the prophet Samuel said, “Obedience is better than sacrifice.” Wherefore, fathers and right worthy men, I pray you and beseech you that this day ye would sustain my weakness with your goodness and patience; furthermore, to help me at the beginning with your good prayers.

And before all-thing let us pray unto God the Father Almighty, first remembering our most holy father the Pope, and all spiritual pastors, with all Christian people; furthermore the most reverend father and lord the Archbishop, president of this council; and all bishops, and all the clergy, and all the people of England; remembering finally this your congregation, desiring God to inspire your minds so accordingly to agree, to such profit and fruit of the Church, that ye seem not, after the council finished, to have been gathered together in vain and without cause. Let us all say Pater Noster.

To exhort you, Reverend Fathers, to the endeavor of reformation of the Church’s estate, (because that nothing hath so disfigured the face of the Church as hath the fashion of secular and worldly living in clerks and priests) I know not where more conveniently to take beginning of my tale than of the apostle Paul, in whose temple ye are gathered together. For he, writing unto the Romans, and under their name unto you, saith, “Be you not conformed to this world, but be you reformed in the newness of your understanding, that ye may prove what is the good will of God, well pleasing and perfect.” This did the Apostle write to all Christian men, but most chiefly unto priests and bishops. Priests and bishops are the light of the world. For unto them said our Savior, “You are the light of the world.” And he said also, “If the light that is in thee be darkness, how dark shall the...
darkness be?” That is to say, if priests and bishops, that should be as lights, run in the dark way of the world, how dark then shall the secular people be? Wherefore Saint Paul said chiefly unto priests and bishops, “Be you not conformable to this world, but be ye reformed.”

In the which words the Apostle doth two things. First, he doth forbid that we be not conformable to the world and be made carnal. Furthermore he doth command that we be reformed in the spirit of God, whereby we are spiritual.

I intending to follow this order, I will speak first of conformity, then after of reformation.

“Be you not (saith he) conformable to this world.”

The Apostle calleth the “world” the ways and manner of secular living, the which chiefly doth rest in four evils of this world: that is to say, in devilish pride, in carnal concupiscence, in worldly covetousness, in secular business. These are in the world, as Saint John the apostle witnesseth in his epistle canonical. For he saith: “All-thing that is in the world is either the concupiscence of the flesh, or the concupiscence of the eyes, or pride of life.”

The same are now and reign in the Church, and in men of the Church; that we may seem truly to say, all-thing that is in the Church is either concupiscence of flesh, or eyes, or pride of life.

And first for to speak of pride of life: how much greediness and appetite of honor and dignity is nowadays in men of the Church? How run they, yea almost out of breath, from one benefice to another; from the less to the more, from the lower to the higher? Who seeth not this? Moreover these that are in the same dignities, the most part of them doth go with so stately a countenance and with so high looks, that they seem not to be put in the humble bishopric of Christ, but rather in the high lordship and power of the world, not knowing nor advertising what Christ the master of all meekness said unto his disciples, whom he called to be bishops and priests:

The princes of people (saith he) have lordship of them, and those that be in authority have power; but do ye not so: but he that is greater among you,

let him be minister; he that is highest in dignity, be he the servant of all men. The Son of Man came not to be ministered unto but to minister. By which words our Savior doth plainly teach that the mastery in the Church is none other thing than a ministration and the high dignity in a man of the Church to be none other thing than a meek service.

The second secular evil is carnal concupiscence. Hath not this vice so grown and waxen in the Church as a flood of their lust, so that there is nothing looked for more diligently in this most busy time of the most part of priests than that that doth delight and please the senses? They give themselves to feasts and banqueting; they spend themselves in vain babbling; they give themselves to sports and plays; they apply themselves to hunting and hawking; they drown themselves in the delights of this world. Procurers and finders of lusts they set by. Against the which kind of men Jude the apostle crieth out in his epistle, saying:

Woe unto them which have gone the way of Cain. They art foul and beastly, feasting in their meats, without fear feeding themselves; floods of the wild sea, foaming out their confusions, unto whom the storm of darkness is reserved for everlasting.

Covetousness is the third secular evil, the which Saint John the apostle calleth concupiscence of the eyes. Saint Paul calleth it idolatry. This abominable pestilence hath so entered in the mind almost of all priests, and so hath blinded the eyes of the mind, that we are blind to all things but only unto those which seem to bring unto us some gains. For what other thing seek we nowadays in the Church than fat benefices and high promotions? Yea, and in the same promotions, of what other thing do we pass upon than of our tithes and rents? That we care not how many, how chargeful, how great benefices we take, so that they be of great value. O covetousness! Saint Paul justly called thee the root of all evil. Of thee cometh this heaping of benefices upon benefices. Of thee, so great pensions assigned

24 Mt 6:23  25 Rm 12:2  26 adjustment in form or character to some pattern or example  27 1 Jn 2:15–17  28 ecclesiastical living  29 appearance  30 informing  31 servant  32 Mt 20:25–28, Mk 10:42–45  33 increased pleasures, delights  34 See Jude 1:11–13.  35 set by: value  36 see: care  37 burden: burdensome; expensive  38 so that: so long as
of many benefices resigned. Of thee, all the suing for tithes, for offering, for mortuaries, for dilapidations, by the right and title of the Church. For the which thing we strive no less than for our own life. O covetousness! Of thee cometh these chargeful visitations of bishops. Of thee cometh the corruptness of courts, and these daily new inventions wherewith the seely people are so sore vexed. Of thee cometh the busyness and wantonness of officials. O covetousness! Mother of all iniquity, of thee cometh this fervent study of ordinaries to dilate their jurisdictions. Of thee cometh this wood and raging contention in ordinaries; of thee, insinuation of testaments; of thee cometh the undue sequestration of fruits; of thee cometh the superstitious observing of all those laws that sound to any lucre, setting aside and despising those that concern the amendment of manners. What should I rehearse the rest? To be short, and to conclude at one word: all corruptness, all the decay of the Church, all the offenses of the world, come of the covetousness of priests, according to that of Saint Paul, that here I repeat again and beat into your ears: “C covetousness is the root of all evil.”

The fourth secular evil that spotteth and maketh ill-favored the face of the Church, is the continual secular occupation, wherein priests and bishops nowadays doth busy themselves, the servants rather of men than of God; the warriors rather of this world than of Christ. For the apostle Paul writeth unto Timothy, “No man, being God’s soldier, turmoil himself with secular business.” The warring of them is not carnal but spiritual. For our warring is to pray, to read, and study Scriptures, to preach the Word of God, to minister the sacraments of health, to do sacrifice for the people, and to offer hosts for their sins. For we are mediators and means unto God for men. The which Saint Paul witnesseth, writing to the Hebrews: “Every bishop (saith he) taken of men, is ordained for men in those high and heavenly things. But the bright work of virtue; but they said, “It is not meet that we should leave the Word of God and serve tables; we will be continually in prayer, and preaching the Word of God.”

And Saint Paul crieth unto the Corinthians: “If you have any secular business, ordain them to be judges that be most in contempt in the Church.” Without doubt, of this secularity, and that clerks and priests, leaving all spiritualness, do turmoil themselves with earthly occupations, many evils do follow.

First, the dignity of priesthood is dishonored, the which is greater than either the king’s or emperor’s; it is equal with the dignity of angels. But the brightness of this great dignity is sore shadowed, when priests are occupied in earthly things, whose conversation ought to be in heaven.

Secondarily, priesthood is despised, when there is no difference betwixt such priests and lay people, but, according to the prophecy of Hosea, “as the people be, so are the priests.”

Thirdly, the beautiful order and holy dignity in the Church is confused, when the highest in the Church do meddle with vile and earthly things, in their stead vile and abject persons do exercise high and heavenly things.

Fourthly, the lay people have great occasion of evils, and cause to fall, when those men whose duty is to draw men from the affection of this world, by their continual conversation in this world teach men to love this world, and of the love of the world cast them down headlong into hell.

Moreover in such priests that are so busied there must needs follow hypocrisy. For when they be so mixed and confused with the lay people, under the garment and habit of a priest they live plainly after the lay fashion. Also by spiritual weakness and bondage fear, when they are made weak with the waters of this world, they dare neither do nor say...
but such things as they know to be pleasant and thankful to their princes.

At last, ignorancy and blindness; when they are blinded with the darkness of this world, they see nothing but earthly things. Wherefore our Savior Christ, not without cause, did warn the prelates of his Church: “Take heed,” said he, “lest your hearts be grieved with gluttony and drunkenness and with the cares of this world.” “With the cares,” saith he, “of this world,” wherewith the hearts of priests being sore charged they cannot hold and lift up their minds to high and heavenly things.

Many other evils there be beside those, that follow of the secularity of priests, which were long here to rehearse. But I make an end.

These be the four evils that I have spoken of, O fathers, O priests, by the which we are conformable to this world, by the which the face of the Church is made evil-favored, by the which the state of it is destroyed truly much more than it was in the beginning by the persecution of tyrants, or afterward by the invasion that followed of heretics. For, in the persecution of tyrants, the Church being vexed was made stronger and brighter. In the invasion of heretics, the Church being shaken was made wiser and more cunning in holy writ. But since this secularity was brought in, after that the secular manner of living crept in in the men of the Church, the root of all spiritual life—that is to say, charity—was extinct. The which taken away, there can neither wise nor strong Church be in God.

In this time also we perceive contradiction of the lay people. But they are not so much contrary unto us, as we are ourselves; nor their contrariness hurteth not us so much as the contrariness of our evil life, the which is contrary both to God and Christ. For he said, “Who that is not with me, is against me.”

We are also nowadays grieved of heretics, men mad with marvelous foolishness. But the heresies of them are not so pestilent and pernicious unto us and the people as the evil and wicked life of priests, the which, if we believe Saint Bernard, is a certain kind of heresy, and chief of all and most perilous. For that same holy father, in a certain convocation, preaching unto the priests of his time, in a certain sermon so he said by these words:

There be many Catholic and faithful men in speaking and preaching, the which same men are heretics in working. For that that heretics do by evil teaching, that same do they through evil example: they lead the people out of the right way, and bring them into error of life. And so much they are worse than heretics, how much their works prevail their words.

This that holy father Saint Bernard, with a great and a fervent spirit, said against the sect of evil priests in his time. By which words he showeth plainly to be two manner of heresies; the one to be of perverse teaching, and the other of naughty life, of which this later is worse and more perilous. The which reigneth now in the Church in priests not living priestly but secularly, to the utter and miserable destruction of the Church.

Wherefore, you fathers, you priests, and all you of the clergy, at the last look up and awake from this your sleep in this forgetful world; and at the last, being well-awaked, hear Paul crying unto you, “Be you not conformable unto this world.”

And this for the first part. Now let us come to the second.

**THE SECOND PART, OF REFORMATION**

*But be you reformed in the newness of your understanding*

The second thing that Saint Paul commandeth is that we be reformed into a new understanding, that we smell those things that be of God. Be we reformed unto those things that are contrary to those I spoke of even now: that is to say, to meekness, to sobriety, to charity, to spiritual occupation; that, as the said Paul writeth unto Titus, “renouncing all wickedness and worldly desires, we live in this world soberly, truly, and virtuously.”
This reformation and restoring of the Church’s estate\textsuperscript{85} must needs begin of you our fathers, and so follow in us your priests and in all the clergy. You are our heads, you are an example of living unto us. Unto you we look as unto marks of our direction. In you and in your life we desire to read, as in lively\textsuperscript{86} books, how and after what fashion we may live. Wherefore, if you will ponder and look upon our motes, first take away the blocks out of your eyes.\textsuperscript{87} It is an old proverb: Physician, heal thyself. You spiritual physicians, first taste you this medicine of purgation of manners,\textsuperscript{88} and then after offer us the same to taste.

The way whereby the Church may be reformed into better fashion is not for to make new laws. For there be laws many enough and out of number, as Solomon saith, “Nothing is new under the sun.”\textsuperscript{89} For the evils that are now in the Church were before in time past, and there is no fault but that fathers have provided very good remedies for it. There are no trespasses, but that there be laws against them in the body of the canon law. Therefore it is no need\textsuperscript{90} that new laws and constitutions be made, but that those that are made already be kept. Wherefore in this your assembly let those laws that are made be called before you and rehearsed:\textsuperscript{91} those laws, I say, that restrain vice, and those that further virtue.

First, let those laws be rehearsed, that do warn you fathers that ye put not oversoon your hands on every man, or admit unto holy orders. For there is the well of evils, that, the broad gate of holy orders opened, every man that offereth himself is all where\textsuperscript{92} admitted without pulling back. Thereof springeth and cometh out the people that are in the Church both of unlearned and evil priests. It is not enough for a priest, after my judgment, to construe a collect,\textsuperscript{93} to put forth a question, or to answer to a sopheme; but much more a good, a pure, and a holy life, approved manners, meetly\textsuperscript{94} learning of Holy Scripture, some knowledge of the sacraments, chiefly and above all thing\textsuperscript{95} the fear of God and love of the heavenly life.

Let the laws be rehearsed, that command that benefits of the Church be given to those that are worthy; and that promotions be made in the Church by the right balance of virtue, not by carnal\textsuperscript{96} affection, not by the acception\textsuperscript{97} of persons; whereby it happeneth nowadays that boys for old men, fools for wise men, evil for good, do reign and rule.

Let the laws be rehearsed, that warreth against the spot of simony. The which corruption, the which infection, the which cruel and odible\textsuperscript{98} pestilence, so creepeth now abroad, as the canker evil in the minds of priests, that many of them are not afeard\textsuperscript{99} nowadays both by prayer and service, rewards and promises, to get them great dignities.

Let the laws be rehearsed, that command personal residence of curates in their churches. For of this many evils grow, because all things nowadays are done by vicaries\textsuperscript{100} and parish priests—yea, and those foolish also and unmeet,\textsuperscript{101} and oftentimes wicked, that seek none other thing in the people than foul lucre,\textsuperscript{102} whereof cometh occasion of evil heresies and ill Christendom\textsuperscript{103} in the people.

Let be rehearsed the laws and holy rules given of fathers, of the life and honesty of clerks, that forbid that a clerk be no merchant, that he be no usurer, that he be no hunter, that he be no common player,\textsuperscript{104} that he bear no weapon; the laws that forbid clerks to haunt taverns, that forbid them to have suspect familiarity with women; the laws that command soberness, and a measurableness\textsuperscript{105} in apparel, and temperance in adorning of the body.

Let be rehearsed also to your lords these monks, canons,\textsuperscript{106} and religious men, the laws that command them to go the straight way that leadeth unto heaven, leaving the broad way of the world; that commandeth them not to turmoil themselves in business, nother\textsuperscript{107} secular nor other; that command that they sue\textsuperscript{108} not in prince’s courts for earthly things. For it is in the Council of Chalcedon that monks ought only to give themselves to prayer and fasting, and to the chastening\textsuperscript{109} of their flesh, and observing of their rules.

Above all things, let the laws be rehearsed, that pertain and concern you my Reverend Fathers and Lord Bishops, laws of your just and canonical
election, in the chapters of your churches, with the

calling of the Holy Ghost. For because that is not
done nowadays, and because prelates are chosen of-
tentimes more by favor of men than by the grace
of God; therefore truly have we not a few times
bishops full little spiritual men, rather worldly than
heavenly, savoring more the spirit of this world than
the spirit of Christ.

Let the laws be rehearsed of the residence of bish-
ops in their dioceses, that command that they look
diligently, and take heed to the health of souls, that
they sow the word of God, that they show them-


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evils, the which is the well of all iniquity.

etousness, the which is the spring and cause of all

For the which things, with all due reverence, I call
chiefly upon you fathers. For this execution of the
laws and observing of the constitutions must needs
begin of you, that ye may teach us priests to fol-
low you by lively\textsuperscript{114} examples; or else truly it will be
said of you, "They lay grievous burdens upon other
men’s backs, and they themselves will not as much
as touch it with their little finger."\textsuperscript{115}

Forsoth\textsuperscript{116} if you keep the laws, and if you re-
form first your life to the rules of the canon laws,
then shall ye give us light, in the which we may see
what is to be done of our part—that is to say, the
light of your good example. And we, seeing our
fathers so keeping the laws, will gladly follow the
steps of our fathers.

The clergy’s and spiritual’s\textsuperscript{117} part once reformed
in the Church, then may we with a just order pro-
cceed to the reformation of the lay’s part, the which
truly will be very easy to do, if we first be reformed.
For the body followeth the soul; and, such rulers as
are in the city, like\textsuperscript{118} dwellers be in it. Where-
fore if priests that have the charge of souls be good,
straight\textsuperscript{119} the people will be good. Our goodness
shall teach them more clearly to be good than all
other teachings and preachings. Our goodness shall
compel them into the right way truly more effectu-
ously than all your suspensions and cursings.

Wherefore, if ye will have the lay people to live
after\textsuperscript{120} your wish and will, first live you yourself af-
fter the will of God; and so, trust me, ye shall get in
them whatsoever ye will.

Ye will be obeyed of\textsuperscript{121} them, and right it is. For
in the epistle to the Hebrews these are the words of
Saint Paul to the lay people: “Obey,” saith he, “to
your rulers, and be you under them.”\textsuperscript{122} But if ye will
have this obedience, first perform in you the reason
and cause of obedience, the which the said Paul
doth teach, and it followeth in the text—that is,
“Take you heed also diligently, as though ye should give a reckoning for their souls,” and they will obey you.

You will be honored of the people. It is reason. For Saint Paul writeth unto Timothy, “Priests that rule well are worthy double honors, chiefly those that labor in word and teaching.” Therefore, if ye desire to be honored, first look that ye rule well, and that ye labor in word and teaching, and then shall the people have you in all honor.

You will reap their carnal things, and gather tithes and offerings without any striving. Right it is. For Saint Paul, writing unto the Romans, saith: “They are debtors, and ought to minister unto you in carnal things.” First sow you your spiritual things, and then ye shall reap plentifully their carnal things. For truly that man is very hard and unjust, that will “reap where he never did sow, and that will gather where he never scattered.”

Ye will have the Church’s liberty, and not to be drawn afore secular judges; and that also is right. For it is in the Psalms: “Touch ye not mine anointed.” But if ye desire this liberty, first unloose yourself from the worldly bondage, and from the services of men; and lift up yourself into the true liberty, the spiritual liberty of Christ, into grace from sins; and serve you God, and reign in him. And then, believe me, the people will not touch the anointed of their Lord God.

Ye would be out of business in rest and peace, and that is convenient. But if ye will have peace, come again to the God of peace and love. Come again to Christ, in whom is the very true peace of the Ghost, the which passeth all wit. Come again to yourself, and to your priestly living. And, to make an end, as Saint Paul saith, “Be you reformed in the newness of your understanding, that you savor those things that are of God; and the peace of God shall be with you.”

These are they, Reverend Fathers and right famous men, that I thought to be said for the reformation of the Church’s estate. I trust ye will take them of your gentleness to the best. And if perhaps it be thought that I have passed my bounds in this sermon, or have said anything out of temper, forgive it me; and ye shall forgive a man speaking of very zeal, [to] a man sorrowing the decay of the Church. And consider the thing itself, not regarding any foolishness. Consider the miserable form and state of the Church, and endeavor yourselves with all your minds to reform it. Suffer not, fathers, this your so great a gathering to depart in vain. Suffer not this your congregation to slip for naught. Truly ye are gathered oftentimes together, but—by your favor to speak the truth—yet I see not what fruit cometh of your assembling, namely to the Church.

Go ye now in the spirit that ye have called on, that, by the help of it, ye may in this your council find out, discern, and ordain those things that may be profitable to the Church, praise unto you, and honor unto God. Unto whom be all honor and glory forever more.

Amen.

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124 reasonable
125 1 Tim 5:17
126 material
128 See Mt 25:24–26,
129 before
130 Ps 104(105):15
131 appropriate
132 (Holy) Spirit
133 surpasses all learning
134 Rom 12:2
135 state
136 out of
137 perhaps
138 proportion
139 of very: out of true
140 Permit
141 wickedness