



John Colet's Convocation Sermon (1512)

You are come together today, fathers and right wise men, to hold a council. In which what you will do and what matters you will handle, I do not yet know, but I wish that, at length, mindful of your name and profession, you would consider of the reformation of ecclesiastical affairs; for never was there more necessity and never did the state of the Church more need endeavors. For the Church – the spouse of Christ – which He wished to be without spot or wrinkle, is become foul and deformed. As saith Isaias, "The faithful city is become a harlot"; and as Jeremias speaks, "She hath committed fornication with many lover," whereby she has conceived many seeds of iniquity and daily bringeth forth the foulest offspring. Wherefore I have come here today, fathers, to admonish you with all your minds to deliberate, in this your Council, concerning the reformation of the Church.

As I am about to exhort you, revered fathers, to endeavor to reform the condition of the Church; because nothing has so disfigured the face of the Church as the secular and worldly way of living on the part of the clergy, I know not how I can commence my discourse more fitly than with the Apostle Paul, in whose cathedral you are now assembled: "Be ye not conformed to this world, but be ye reformed in the newness of your minds, that ye may prove what is the good, and well pleasing, and perfect will of God." This the Apostle wrote to all Christian men, but emphatically to priests and bishops: for priests and bishops are the lights of the world, as the Saviour said to them, "Ye are the light of the world"; and again He said, "If the light that is in you be darkness, how great will be that darkness!" That is, if the priests and bishops, the very lights, run in the dark ways of the world, how dark must the lay people be! Wherefore, emphatically did St. Paul say to priests and bishops, "Be ye not conformed to this world, but be ye reformed in the newness of you minds."

"Be not," he says, "conformed to this world." By the world the Apostle means the worldly way and manner of living, which consists chiefly in these four evils – viz., in devilish pride, in carnal concupiscence, in worldly covetousness, and in worldly occupations. These things are in the world, as St. John testifies in his canonical epistle; for he says, "All things that are in the world are either the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye, or the pride of life." These things in like manner exist and reign in the Church, and amongst ecclesiastical persons, so that we seem able truly to say, "All things in the Church are either the lust of the flesh, lust of the eye, or the pride of life!"

In the first place, to speak of pride of life – what eagerness and hunger after honor and dignity are found I these days amongst ecclesiastical persons! What a breathless race from benefice to benefice, from a less to a greater one, from a lower to a higher! Who is there who does not see this? Who that sees it does not grieve over it? Moreover, those who hold these dignities, most of them carry themselves with such lofty mien and high looks that their place does not seem to be in the humble priesthood of Christ but in proud worldly domination! – not acknowledging or perceiving what the master of humility, Christ, said to His disciples whom He called to the priesthood. "The princes of the nations," said He, "have lordship over them, and those who are amongst the great have power. But let it not be so with you: but he who is great among you let him be your minister; he who is chief, let him be the servant of all. For the Son of Man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister." By which

words the Saviour plainly teaches that magistracy in the Church is nothing else than humble service.

As to the second worldly evil, which is the lust for the flesh – has not this vice, I ask, inundated the Church as with the flood of its lust, so that nothing is more carefully sought after, in these most troublous times, by the most part of priests, than that which ministers sensual pleasure? They give themselves to feasting and banqueting; spend themselves in vain babbling, take part in sports and plays, devote themselves to hunting and hawking; are drowned in the delights of this world; patronize those who cater for their pleasure. It was against this kind of people that Jude the Apostle exclaimed: "Woe unto them! For they have gone in the way of Cain, and ran greedily after the error of Balaam for reward, and perished in gainsaying of Core. These are the spots in your feasts of charity, when they feast with you, feeding themselves without fear; clouds they are without water, carried about by winds; trees whose fruit withers without fruit, twice dead, plucked up by the roots; raging waves of the sea, foaming out their own shame; wandering stars, to whom is reserved and blackness of darkness forever."

Covetousness also, which is the third worldly evil, which the Apostle John calls the lust of the eye, and Paul idolatry – this most horrible plague – has so taken possession of the hearts of nearly all priests, and has so darkened the eyes of their minds, that nowadays we are blind to everything but that alone which seems to be able to bring us gain. For in these days, what else do we seek for in the Church than rich benefices and promotions? In these same promotions, what else do we count upon but their fruits and revenues? We rush after them with such eagerness that we care not how many and what duties, or how great benefices we take, if only they have great revenues.

O Covetousness! Paul rightly called thee the root of all evil! From thee comes all this piling up of benefices one on top of the other; from thee come the great pensions, assigned out of many benefices resigned; from thee quarrels about tithes, about offerings, about mortuaries, about dilapidations, about ecclesiastical right and title, for which we fight as for our very lives! O Covetousness! From thee come burdensome visitations of bishops; from thee corruptions of law courts, and those daily fresh inventions by which the poor people are harassed; from thee the sauciness and insolence of officials! O Covetousness! Mother of all iniquity! From thee comes that eager desire on the part of ordinaries to enlarge their jurisdiction; from thee their foolish and mad contention to get hold of the probate of wills; from thee undue sequestrations of fruits; from thee that superstitious observance of all those laws which are lucrative, and disregard and neglect of those which point at the correction of morals! Why should I mention the rest? – To sum up in one word: every corruption, all the ruin of the Church, all the scandals of the world, come from the covetousness of priests, according to the saying of Paul, which I repeat again, and beat into your ears, "Covetousness is the root of all evil!"

The fourth worldly evil which mars and spots the face of the Church is incessant worldly occupation in which many priests and bishops in these days entangle themselves – servants of men rather than of God, soldiers of this world rather than of Christ. For the Apostle Paul writes to Timothy, "No man that warreth for God entangleth himself in the affairs of this life." But priests are "soldiers of God." Their warfare truly is not carnal, but spiritual: for our warfare is to pray, to read, and to meditate upon the Scriptures; to minister the word of God, to administer the sacraments of salvation, to make sacrifice for the people, and to offer masses for their souls. For we are mediators between men and God, as Paul testifies, writing to the Hebrews: "Every priest," he says, "taken from amongst men is ordained for men in things pertaining to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins."

Wherefore the Apostles, the first priests and bishops, so shrank from every taint of worldly things that they did not even wish to minister to the necessities of the poor, although these were the greatest works of piety; for they said, "It is not right that we should leave the word of God and serve tables; we will give ourselves continually to

prayer, and the ministry of the word of God." And Paul exclaims to the Corinthians, "If you have any secular matters, make those of you judges who are of least estimation in the Church." Indeed from this worldliness, and because the clergy and priests, neglecting spiritual things, involve themselves in earthly occupation, many evils follow. First, the priestly dignity is dishonored, which is greater than either royal or imperial dignity, for it is equal to that of angels. And the splendor of this high dignity is obscured by darkness when priests, whose conversation ought to be in heaven, are occupied with the things of the earth. Secondly, the dignity of priests is despised when there is no difference between such priests and laymen; but (according to the prophet Hosea) "as the people are, so are the priests." Thirdly, the beautiful order of the hierarchy in the Church is confused when the magnates of the Church are busied in vile and earthly things, and in their stead vile and abject persons meddle with high and spiritual things. Fourthly, the laity themselves are scandalized and driven to ruin, when those whose duty it is to draw men from this world, teach men to love this world by their own devotion to worldly things, and by their own love of this world are themselves carried down headlong into hell. Besides, when priests themselves are thus entangled, it must end in hypocrisy: for, mixed up and confused with the laity, they lead, under a priestly exterior, the mere life of a layman. Also their spiritual weakness and servile fear, when enervated by the waters of this world, makes them dare neither to do nor to say anything but what they know will be grateful and pleasing to their princes. Lastly, such is their ignorance and blindness, when blinded by the darkness of this world, that they can discern nothing but earthly things. Wherefore, not without cause our Saviour Christ admonished the prelates of His Church, "Take heed lest your hearts be burdened by surfeiting or banqueting, and the cares of this world." "By the cares," He says, "of this world!" The hearts of priests weighed down by riches cannot lift themselves on high, nor raise themselves to heavenly things.

Many other evils there be, which are the result of the worldliness of priests, which it would take long to mention; but I have done. These are those four evils, O fathers! O priests! By which, as I have said, we are conformed to this world, by which the face of the Church is marred, by which her influence is destroyed, plainly, far more than it was destroyed and marred, either at the beginning by the persecution of tyrants, or after that by the invasion of heresies which followed. For by the persecution of tyrants the persecuted Church was made stronger and more glorious; by the invasion of heresies the Church, being shaken, was made wiser and more skilled in Holy Scriptures. But after the introduction of this most sinful worldliness, when worldliness had crept in amongst the clergy, the root of all spiritual life-charity itself- was extinguished. And without this the Church can neither be wise nor strong in God.

In these times also we experience much opposition from the laity, but they are not so opposed to us as we are to ourselves. Nor does their opposition do us so much hurt as the opposition of our own wicked lives, which are opposed to God and to Christ; for He said, "He that is not with me is against me." We are troubled in these days too also by heretics-men mad with strange folly- but this heresy of theirs is not so pestilential and pernicious to us and the people as the vicious and depraved lives of the clergy, which if we may believe St. Bernard, is a species of heresy, and the greatest and most pernicious of all: for that holy father, preaching in a certain convocation to the priests of his time, in his sermon spoke in these words: "There are many who are catholic in their speaking and preaching who are very heretics in their actions, for what heretics do by their false doctrines these men do by their evil examples; they seduce the people and lead them into the error of life; and they are by so much worse than heretics as actions are stronger than words." These things said Bernard, that holy father of so great and ardent spirit, against the faction of wicked priests of his time; by which he plainly shows that here be two kinds of heretical pravity- one of perverse doctrine, the other of perverse living- of which the latter is the greater and more pernicious; and this reigns in the Church, to the miserable destruction of the Church, her priests living after a worldly and not after a priestly fashion. Wherefore do you fathers, you priests and all of you of the clergy, awake at length, and rise up from this your sleep in this forgetful world: and being awake, at length listen to Paul

calling unto you, "Be ye not conformed to this world."

"But be ye reformed in the newness of your minds." What Paul commands us secondly is that we should "be reformed into a new mind"; that we should savor the things that are of God; that we should be reformed to those things which are contrary to what I have been speaking of—i.e., to humility, sobriety, charity, spiritual occupations; just as Paul wrote to Titus, "Denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present world."

But this reformation and restoration in ecclesiastical affairs must needs begin with you, our fathers, and then afterwards descend upon us your priests and the whole clergy. For you are our chiefs— you are our examples of life. To you we look as waymarks for our direction. In you and in your lives we desire to read, as in living books, how we ourselves should live. Wherefore, if you wish to see our mores, first take the beams out of your own eyes; for it is an old proverb, "Physician, heal thyself." Do you, spiritual doctors, first assay that medicine for the purgation of morals, and then you may offer it to us to taste of it also.

The way, moreover, by which the Church is to be reformed and restored to a better condition is not to enact any new laws (for there are laws enough and to spare). As Solomon says, "There is no new thing under the sun." The diseases which are now in the Church were the same in former ages, and there is no evil for which the holy Fathers did not provide excellent remedies; there are no crimes in prohibition of which there are not laws in the body of Canon Law. The need, therefore, is not for the enactment of new laws and constitutions, but for the observance of those already enacted. Wherefore, in this your congregation, let the existing laws be produced and recited which prohibit what is evil, and which enjoin what is right.

First, let those laws be recited which admonish you, fathers, not to lay your hands on any, nor to admit them to Holy Orders, rashly. For here is the source from whence other evils flow, because if the entrance to Holy Orders be thrown open, all who offer themselves are forthwith admitted without hindrance. Hence proceed and emanate those hosts of both unlearned and wicked priests which are in the Church. For it is not, in my judgment, enough that a priest can construe a collect, propound a proposition, or reply to a sophism; but much more needful are a good, pure, and holy life, approved morals, moderate knowledge of the Scriptures, some knowledge of the sacraments, above all fear of God and love of heavenly life.

Let the laws be recited which direct that ecclesiastical benefices should be conferred on the worthy, and promotions in the Church made with just regard to merit; not by carnal affection, nor the acceptance of persons, whereby it comes to pass in these days, that boys instead of old men, fools instead of wise men, wicked instead of good men, reign and rule!

Let the laws be recited against the guilt of simony; which plague, which contagion, which dire pestilence, now creeps like a cancer through the minds of priests, so that most are not ashamed in these days to get for themselves great dignities by petitions and suits at court, rewards and promises.

Let the laws be recited which command the personal residence of curates at their churches: for many evils spring from the custom, in these days, of performing all clerical duties by help of vicars and substitutes; men too without judgment, unfit, and often wicked, who will seek nothing from the people but sordid gain—whence spring scandals, heresies, and bad Christianity among the people.

Let the laws be rehearsed, and the holy rules handed down from our ancestors, concerning the life and character of the clergy, which prohibit any churchman from being a merchant, usurer, or hunter, or common player, or from

bearing arms—the laws which prohibit the clergy from frequenting taverns, from having unlawful intercourse with women—the laws which command sobriety and modesty in vestment, and temperance in dress.

Let also the laws be recited concerning monks and religious men, which command that, leaving the broad way of the world, they enter the narrow way which leads to life; which command them not to meddle in business, whether in secular or ecclesiastical; which command that they should not engage in suits in civil courts for earthly things. For in the Council of Chalcedon it was decreed that monks should give themselves up entirely to prayer and fasting, the chastisement of their flesh and the observance of their monastic rule.

Above all, let those laws be recited which concern and pertain to you, reverend fathers and lords of bishop—laws concerning your just and canonical election, in the chapters of your churches, with the invocation of the Holy Spirit: for because this is not done in these days, and prelates are often chosen more by the favor of men than by the grace of God, so, in consequence, we sometimes certainly have bishops too little spiritual—men more worldly than heavenly, wiser in the spirit of this world than in the spirit of Christ!

Let the laws be rehearsed concerning the residence of bishops in their dioceses, which command that they watch over the salvation of souls, that they disseminate the word of God, that they personally appear in their churches at least on great festivals, that they sacrifice for their people, that they hear the causes of the poor, that they sustain the fatherless and widows, that they exercise themselves always in the works of piety.

Let the laws be rehearsed concerning the due distribution of the patrimony of Christ—laws which command that the goods of the Church be spent not in sumptuous buildings, not in magnificence and pomp, not in feasts and banquets, not in luxury and lust, not in enriching kinsfolk or in keeping hounds, but in things useful and needful to the Church. For when he was asked by Augustine, the English bishop, in what way English bishops and prelates should dispose of those goods which were the offerings of the faithful, Pope Gregory replied (and his reply is placed in the Decretals, ch. xii q. 2) that the goods of bishops should be divided into four parts, of which one part should go to the bishop and his family, another to his clergy, a third for repairing buildings, a fourth to the poor.

Lastly, let those laws and constitutions be renewed concerning the holding of Councils, which command that Provincial Councils should be held more frequently for the reformation of the Church. For nothing ever happens more detrimental to the Church of Christ than the omission of Councils, both general and provincial.

The clerical and priestly part of the Church being thus reformed, we can then proceed with better grace to the reformation of the lay part, which indeed it will be very easy to do, if we ourselves have been reformed first. For the body follows the soul, and as the rulers in a State are, so shall the people be. Wherefore, if priests themselves, the rulers of souls, were good, the people in their turn would become good also: for our own goodness would teach others how they may be good more clearly than all other kinds of teaching and preaching. Our goodness would urge them on in the right way far more efficaciously than all your suspensions and excommunications. Wherefore, if you wish the lay people to live according to your will and pleasure, you must first live according to the will of God, and thus (believe me) you will easily attain what you wish in them.

These, reverend fathers and most distinguished men, are the things that I thought should be spoken concerning the reformation of the clergy. I trust that, in your clemency, you will take them in good part. If, by chance, I should seem to have gone too far in this sermon—if I have said anything with too much warmth—forgive it me, and pardon a man speaking out of zeal, a man sorrowing for the ruin of the Church; and passing, by any foolishness of mine, consider the thing itself. Consider the miserable state and condition of the Church, and bend

your whole minds to its reformation. Suffer not, fathers, suffer not this so illustrious assembly to break up without result. Suffer not this your congregation to slip by for nothing. You indeed have often been assembled. But (if by your leave I may speak the truth) I see not what fruit has yet resulted, especially to the Church, from assemblies of this kind. Go now, in the Spirit whom you have invoked, that you may be able with His assistance, to devise, to ordain, and to decree those things which may be useful to the Church, and redound to your praise and the honor of God: to whom be all honor and glory, forever and ever, Amen!

SOURCE: John C. Olin, *The Catholic Reformation* (Fordham Univ Press, 1992)