

CHAPTER XXIV

THE METHOD OF INSTILLING PIETY

1. PIETY is the gift of God, and is given us from on high by our counsellor and guide, the Holy Spirit. But, since the Holy Spirit usually employs natural agencies, and has chosen parents, teachers, and ministers who should faithfully plant and water the grafts of Paradise (1 Cor. iii. 6-8), it is right that these should appreciate the extent of their duties.

2. We have already explained what we mean by piety, namely, that (after we have thoroughly grasped the conceptions of faith and of religion) our hearts should learn to seek God everywhere (since He has concealed Himself with His works as with a curtain, and, invisibly present in all visible things, directs all, though unseen), and that when we have found Him we should follow Him, and when we have attained Him should enjoy Him. The first we do through our understanding, the second through our will, and the third through the joy arising from the consciousness of our union with God.

3. We seek God by noticing the signs of His divinity in all things created. We follow God by giving ourselves up completely to His will, both to do and to suffer whatever shall have seemed good to Him. We enjoy God by so acquiescing in His love and favour that nothing in heaven or on earth appears to us more to be desired than God Himself, that nothing appears pleasanter to think of, and nothing sweeter than to sing His praises; thus our hearts are joined to His in love.

4. The sources from which we can draw this exaltation are three, and the manner in which we can draw from them is threefold.

5. These sources are Holy Writ, the world, and ourselves. The first is the Word of God, the second is His handiwork, and the third is inspired by Him. There is no doubt that we can derive the knowledge and the love of God from the Scriptures. The very heathen testify that piety can be derived from the world and from the wise contemplation of the marvellous works of God contained in it; for they, by nothing but the contemplation of the world, were brought to revere the Godhead. This is shown by the examples of Socrates, Plato, Epictetus, Seneca, and others. But still, in the case of these men, to whom no special revelation from on high had been given, this feeling of love was imperfect, and wrongly directed. That those who seek to gain a knowledge of God from His word as well as from His works are filled with the deepest love for Him, is shown by the instances of Job, Elihu, David, and other pious men.

6. The manner of drawing piety from these sources is threefold: meditation, prayer, and examination.

"These three," says Luther, "make a theologian; but indeed they are essential to make a true Christian."

7. Meditation is the constant, attentive, and devoted consideration of the works, the words, and the goodness of God, the thoughtful acknowledgment that it is from the good-will of God alone (either active or permissive) that all things come, and that all the counsels of the divine will attain their end in the most marvellous ways.

8. Prayer is the frequent, or rather the continual, yearning after God, and the supplication that He may sustain us in His mercy and guide us with His Spirit.

9. Examination is the continual testing of our progress in piety, and may come from ourselves or from others. Under this head come human, devilish, and divine temptations. For men should examine themselves to see if they are faithful, and do the will of God; and it is necessary that we should be tested by other men, by our friends, and

by our enemies. This is the case when those who are set over others are vigilant and attentive, and, by open or by secret scrutiny, try to find out what progress has been made; or when God places an adversary by our side to teach us to find our refuge in Him, and to show us how strong our faith is. Finally, Satan himself is sent by God, or comes against us of his own accord, that the state of our hearts may be made evident.

These three modes, therefore, must be instilled into the Christian youth, that they may learn to raise their hearts to Him who is the first and the last of all things, and may seek rest for their souls in Him alone.

10. The special method is contained in twenty-one rules.

(i.) Care should be taken to instil piety in early childhood.

For not to put off such instruction is advantageous, and to put it off is dangerous, since it is only reasonable to begin with what naturally comes first, and is the most important. But what is more important than piety? What else is profitable for all things, having promise of the life which now is, and of that which is to come? (1 Tim. iv. 8). This is the one thing needful (Luke x. 42), to seek the Kingdom of God, since all things shall be added to him who does so (Matt. vi. 33). To postpone this is hazardous, since, unless the mind be imbued with the love of God when young, it is easy for a silent contempt of the Godhead and for profanity to make their entrance, and when once they have done so, it is difficult, if not impossible, to dislodge them. Thus the prophet, complaining of the horrible impiety of his people, says that there are none left whom God can teach, save "them that are weaned from the milk and drawn from the breasts," that is to say, the young (Isaiah xxviii. 9), and another prophet says that it is impossible to convert to well-doing those that are accustomed to do evil (Jeremiah xiii. 23).

11. (ii.) Therefore, as soon as children can use their eyes, their tongues, their hands, and their feet, let them learn to

look towards heaven, to stretch their hands upwards, to utter the names of God and of Christ, to bend the knee before His unseen majesty, and to revere it.

It is not so difficult to teach these things to children as those imagine, who, not realising how important it is for us to tear ourselves away from Satan, from the world, and from ourselves, pay little consideration to a matter of such gravity. At first the children will not understand the true nature of what they are doing, since their intelligence is still weak; but what is of importance is that they learn to do that which subsequent experience will teach them to be right. For, when they have got into the habit of acting as they should, it will be easier to explain to them why such conduct is good, and how it is best carried out. God has commanded to consecrate all first-fruits to Him; why not, therefore, the first-fruits of our thoughts, of our utterances, of our movements, and of our actions?

12. (iii.) While it is still possible to influence boys, it is of great importance to impress upon them that we are not here for the sake of this life, but are destined for eternity; that our life on earth is only transitory, and serves to prepare us for our eternal home.

This can easily be taught by the examples of infants, boys, youths, and old men who are daily snatched away by death. These facts should be diligently impressed on the young, that they may realise how very transitory our life on earth is.

13. (iv.) They should also be taught that our only business on earth should be to prepare for the next world.

For it would be foolish to pay attention to those things which will be taken from us, and to neglect those things which will accompany us into eternity.

14. (v.) They should then be taught that the life to which men go when they leave this earth, is twofold: either a blessed life with God, or a wretched one in hell, and that both are everlasting.

This may be demonstrated by the example of Lazarus and the rich man; for the soul of the former was carried