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Kilian McDonnell OSB

College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, kmcdonnell@csbsju.edu

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On Fearing Our Friends

by **KILIAN McDONNELL, O.S.B.**

IT is always good policy to fear our friends more than our enemies. We are ever on guard against our avowed enemies. At the first suggestion of approach our defenses are up. And since they have made no secret of their hostility they are never mistaken for friends. Their threat to us may be formidable, but we are not easily frightened, for the battle we fight is an old battle and we know all their tactics. We know when to expect a frontal attack, when a feint, when a strategic retreat. They seldom fool us.

But a friend can bring us down to a defeat more inglorious than any battle we ever lost to an enemy. And the pity of it all is that we have not the faintest idea that there has been a battle, let alone that we have lost.

To have suffered defeat is bad enough, but it is intolerable to have been led to slaughter so tenderly, to have had the knife placed to artery with so light a touch that we did not recognize in the flow of blood the defeat we would never have suffered at the hands of our enemies.

But whom of our friends are we to fear? Lent and Easter can give us some clue. In the early Church the whole of Lent was a preparation for baptism; and Easter was the official day for baptizing. To those who already were baptized, Lent and Easter meant reflection on the significance of baptism; the glory of their vocation, the dignity to which baptism had raised them.

They knew that baptism placed on them the obligation of being different. Now that their souls had been seared deep with the mark of Christ, now that He had breathed upon them the breath of God's own life, they could not go on as though nothing had happened. It would be hypocrisy mounting almost to sacrilege to return to the way of life they had lived while they were still kissing the jeweled toes of their household gods.

A profound change had taken place at the very core of their being, and that transformation demanded a change in their lives. It would no longer be

sufficient to be what they should have been even without Christ. It would not be enough for them to be just honest, temperate, kind. They should have been all of these before they knew Christ. The good heathen is obliged to pursue these virtues by the fact that he is man. But he who has been baptized must go beyond what is demanded of the good pagan. He must not despise the good pagan or his virtues, but he must realize that the standards of virtue proper to a good pagan are quite improper for him.

The baptized person has to live in a world which places little value on baptism, indeed, little value on Christ. It is the world of the good pagan and the not-so-good pagan; a world that is pagan in its thinking and in its living; for whom Bethlehem is a pleasant fairy tale and Calvary a mythological tragedy; for whom virtue is the daily bath, heaven a tenuous pie-in-the-sky, and hell a trick from the bogymen's bag.

He has to live in the world which holds that a novel is good if it relaxes the mind, though it might, incidentally, destroy the soul; which says that divorce is not wrong because John's other wife loves Sue's other husband, and love makes all things right; which smiles indulgently on sins of the flesh because they are signs of red blood, or black beard, or something; which delights in clothes designed to reveal rather to cover, with necklines of various acrobatic abilities—some dive, some plunge, some disappear; which sees no difference between what is socially unacceptable and what is sinful.

This is the air the baptized breathes. And he has little fear of contamination because the atmosphere is commended to him by his good pagan friends, who are people of no little wisdom.

Yes, it is our good pagan friends that we must fear. Not that they are all one great lot of rakes and rascals. Not at all. If they were, we would not very likely have to fear them. They are nice pagans with a nice pagan way of thinking.

And they pretty well run our world

and, to a surprising degree, our life: they mold our likes and dislikes; they put thoughts in our mind and words in our mouth. They write the novels on our bookshelf; they edit our daily newspapers; they teach our Joan civics in high school and our Bob literature in college; they act in our movies; produce our television shows; run our government; and they deliver milk to our kitchen door. They are the butcher, the baker, the candlestick maker. We cannot escape them.

Unless we stop every once in awhile and ask ourselves how Christian are our lives, we will find that soon we have Christian souls with pagan consciences. How about this realistic novel? This earthy TV show? This low-cut dress? Have we lost our Christian sensibilities? Have we surrendered to the pagan novelist, teacher, and milkman?

IT would not all be so bad if we were aware of what is happening to us, but we just are not. It is all so very subtle; great vices masquerading as little virtues. It is much as the French novelist Bernanos said: "Rarely does sin enter within us by violence, but rather by cunning. It seeps in like the air. It has neither form nor color nor taste proper to itself; it assumes all forms, all colors, all tastes. It wears us away inwardly." Had our faith been openly attacked by our enemies we would have resisted to death. But we have surrendered to our good pagan friends without our even knowing, and very likely without their knowing, there has even been a battle.

And it can go so far that we become one of them. At baptism we received the light of faith. We can neglect the light within. It is a light which goes out so very slowly that our eyes become accustomed to the dark, and we wake up one morning to find that it is dark, and we are not afraid.

Easter is a feast of remembering. Baptism has made the boast of the Pharisee come true; we are indeed different from the rest of men, "new creatures" as St. Paul says.