

GESTA DOCTRINAMQUE

Let the brothers reflect on and make known the teaching and achievements (gesta doctrinamque) of those in the family of St. Dominic who have gone before them, while not forgetting to pray for them (Cf. LCO 16).

JULIAN THE APOSTATE: PRIESTLY RETREAT MASTER

Père Marie-Joseph Lagrange (1855-1938)

Editor's note: Père Lagrange, the renowned Dominican biblical scholar and founder of modern Catholic scriptural exegesis, originally published this reflection. Julian the Apostate (331-363), whose writings Père Lagrange playfully uses in the conference that follows, was the Emperor of Rome from 361-363. Raised a Christian, Julian drifted from the faith at an early age and formally apostatized in 355—despite having been a fellow student in Athens with Sts. Gregory of Nazianzen and Basil the Great. As Emperor, Julian strove to curtail the spread of Christianity and reestablish Roman paganism.

I'm overstating the case—Julian the Apostate is not the ideal preacher for priests. It would be inappropriate to talk about him during a more solemn, evening lecture. But to fight off sleep, an afternoon conference invites smiling, even laughing. I offer to readers of *The Spiritual Life*¹ a talk from that time of day: after all, it is not without benefit for priests to know just how

exalted the Apostate's idea of the priest was. The delightful thing here is that Julian, at first a Christian (and why not sincerely so?), had recognized that the Christian priests close to him were men of God, and he prided himself on elevating the clergy of paganism to their level. This is a well-known fact among scholars, but not something at everyone else's fingertips. Now, however, everyone can follow along with Julian's very serious and very comical effort in the admirable edition of Julian's *Letters* published (with a version in French) by Mr. Bidez for the *Collection Budé*. In borrowing Mr. Bidez's translation—excellent in every way—I will merely rearrange portions of the texts that he has brought to light so well.

Unfaithful to the Christian faith, Julian had maintained its ideal in his heart. He took very seriously his role as “Sovereign Pontiff” [of paganism] and he resolved to send a sort of encyclical to the priests of the Greek gods to remind them of their duties. He undertook this grand work by writing to the high priests, the leaders of the cult in a province, or to the priestesses. Reading these letters is captivating (less so, I admit, than the letters of St. Paul—and it doesn't have the same benefit). Let's just say that it has the character and fascinating pull of a devil's confession on the lips of a possessed man being exorcised. I do not presume to gloss—or even to analyze—these letters, but only to present some excerpts pertaining to the priestly life.

We begin, my dear friends, with the priestly vocation itself. We are counting on you, priests, to recruit good candidates: “*As the priestly life requires more sanctity than the civil life, it is necessary to lead men to it through your teaching.*” What dispositions are required in order to be chosen? “*I declare that we should choose the best men in the cities, those who have the most love, first for the gods, then for men—but whether they are poor or rich is less important.*” Not badly said. Naturally, we should replace “the gods” with “the Lord God.” Are not those who practice the first commandment

(and the second, which follows it) the ones who promise to exercise the best mercy and zeal?

The priest, once chosen, should render himself worthy of his holy ministry. Piety takes first place. Among all the practices that assure solid devotion—whether by leading one to flee from sin or by facilitating prayer—we can give first place to the practice of the presence of God. This is precisely Julian’s view: “*We must begin by practicing piety towards the gods. It is fitting that we should carry out our ministry before them with the idea that they are present and that they see us—and even that we can see them; their eyes, more powerful than any bolt of lightning, pierce through our secret thoughts . . . the gods see everything, and our piety brings joy to their heart . . . the human soul has an affinity and a kinship with the gods.*”

This is a fitting practice for everyone, but the priest is especially a man of worship. He should omit nothing that is of good service to God. In this, “*one must learn by heart hymns in honor of the gods. A great number of these exist—very beautiful, and composed by both the ancients and the moderns.*” I gladly say that I prefer the ancient ones—those of Saint Ambrose or Saint Thomas Aquinas, or of the anonymous author who composed the incomparable prose of the *Veni Sancte Spiritus*. But do we have the courage to learn them by heart? We have the breviary, that’s true, but for a sick priest who passes long nights without sleep, how sweet it is to recite these hymns by memory!

According to Julian, a priest should pray three times a day. He was especially severe with respect to priests-on-duty (we might recall a certain Blessed of ours who never allowed the hebdomadarian to leave the priory during the week).² The “week” for pagan priests lasted thirty days. Throughout this time, “*he shall not go either to his house nor to any public place. He shall occupy himself with divine worship, carefully observing everything and regulating himself completely.*” During this secluded time he

will make *“the gods the object of pious meditations, considering their temples and their images with deference and devotion, full of respect, as if he were seeing the gods present before him.”*

But the priest is not always occupied with the service of the altar. Look at him returning home: being a cultivated man, he will not miss out on reading—and surely he will have good excuses for reading novels. When we speak about them in his presence, he has to be able to condemn or approve them, and so he must know the world. Novels, then, are permissible—even necessary! Haven’t you heard this before?

But that is not Julian’s view. *“We should read histories drawn from real facts. Let us cast off fictions written in the form of history, . . . love stories, and absolutely everything else that resembles them.”* Oh my Reverend Father! Are you banning every novel? Even Paul Bourget? I mean, even Xenophon of Ephesus, who speaks of love only to praise marital fidelity?—*“Do you not know that for priests no such reading befits their sacred character?”*

Know, my dear brother (if you do not already see for yourself) that *“such passages produce in the soul a peculiar disposition, capable of gradually arousing the passions and then suddenly enkindling a violent flame.”*

Hmm. That’s not poorly argued. Julian could have heard something similar from the mouth of the ever-sensible St. Gregory Nazianzen, who understood the human heart so well.

What, then, will this intransigent preacher allow? Without doubt, for him philosophy replaces theology. But which philosophy? Not Epicurus’s hedonism, that’s for sure, nor Pyrrho’s skepticism. He wasn’t content just to blacklist their writings: he would have burned them, but *“a gift from the gods destroyed their works, to the point that the majority have disappeared.”*

This fanatic of pagan classics was not, then, a slave to dramatic literature. Morality and the service of the gods came before everything! Thus, even among the philosophers, a priest should only read those *“who, in the course of their education, chose the*

gods as their guides—like Pythagoras, Plato, Aristotle, and the school of Chrysippus and Zeno,” which is to say, the Stoics, those defenders of providence and enemies of pleasure. The sovereign pontiff Julian continues: “At home, we priests should take up only that which can inspire piety within us and teach us on the subject of the gods—first of all that they exist, then that their providence extends to things here below.” That’s a fairly basic theology: it leaves a little leisure time for reading the newspapers.



EDWARD ARMITAGE - JULIAN THE APOSTATE
PRESIDING AT A CONFERENCE OF SECTARIANS

All the same, how many priests would really be keen to find Julian browsing through their libraries? And beyond just the libraries (always a serious thing), there’s the question of which books we read daily! What, then, should we read? The Apostate gave us the answer, speaking this time of Christian priests rather than pagan ones. When he refused their right to teach the *belles-lettres*, he cried, “*Let them read Luke and Matthew!*”

It was an unjust exclusion, as his old colleague from Athens, Saint Basil, showed well in his admirable “Address to Young Men on Greek Literature.” Still, the advice to read the Sacred Scriptures is decent. To avoid exposing my scrupulously exact citations to suspicion, I won’t force Julian to say something he didn’t say. But *if he had known about them*, Julian surely would have also recommended certain commentaries on the gospels, as well as [this journal,] *The Spiritual Life*.

Now back to his clergy.

Having supervised the priest’s internal character, it goes without saying that Julian demanded from them a perfect external demeanor. The priest should be respected by all, and he has to earn it. Before all else, he should avoid compromising relationships with “*entertainers or charioteers*,” that is to say, he should not appear too sportive. He prohibits drinking in bars. Even when traveling?—Julian doesn’t distinguish.

Easterners had inherited from the Greeks a passionate taste for the theater: “*Let no priest show his face at the theater!*” So, would it ever be allowed for a public-speaking professor to go to *La Comédie-Française* to show to his students the right way to put on *Le Cid* or *The Misanthrope*? No! Julian even wanted to suppress the pieces that were performed at his time and return the theater to its “primitive purity.” In speaking of those modern pieces, he might have used the memorable words of Alfred de Vigny’s *Melpomène*,

O daughter of Euripides, O beautiful daughter of antiquity,
Priestess, what have you done to your white tunic?

But he dared not. He might as well have suppressed paganism itself (and he was not ignorant of the fact that Aristophanes had been a contemporary of Sophocles). Even the ancient comedies horrified him with their dirty jokes. Alas, I think the clergy of his time did not always refrain from these jests that scandalized the

laity! *“Priests should abstain from every impure action and from every licentious practice; and they should also keep themselves from uttering—or even hearing—indecent remarks. We must forbid, then, every crude joke and every dissolute conversation.”*

Note the “we.” I remember once boarding a train with some priests who were leaving a retreat. I found them railing against the preacher. “You’re this” and “You’re that,” he had berated them. “In such circumstances,” one of the protesters said, “a gentleman should say we!” Julian—a good retreat preacher—always says “we.” He even forgets (a little) what the imperial dignity requires of him, for while it demands proper protocol, he prohibits showy elegance: *“In public places, then, let us refrain from sumptuous clothing, from boasting, and from every ostentation.”*

Nevertheless, as the emperor he did order the governors of his provinces to respect the priestly dignity. That was very practical (much more so than begging the clergy not to be so hard on the Prefect). The Church had primacy of place, and in the temples she was especially in her element: *“Let no priest go out to meet the governors when they enter the city; rather, let the priest meet them only when they enter into the temples of the gods, and without leaving the vestibule . . . As soon as they have crossed the threshold of the sanctuary, they become mere private individuals. As you well know, within the temple you are the one in charge (as divine law requires)”*—and imperial law bowed down.

Conscious of his dignity, the pagan priest should apply himself to the care of the poor: he should be charitable towards the needy, and he should set up hospices. But with this the pagan pope tipped his hand. He would not let the Galileans have the advantage of their spirit of charity. Jesus Christ had said that they would be known by this sign—and so it was with their example that the Apostate, jealous of their virtues, attempted to galvanize priests of a perishing paganism out of their selfishness, their secularity, and their lukewarm religiosity. His efforts were fruitless; this royal preacher was preaching in a desert.

But perhaps Julian's summons may not be fruitless for us, if (paradoxically) it makes us understand what the world expects of us—which is often also what God expects of us.

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TRANSLATOR'S ENDNOTES

¹ Founded in 1919, *La Vie Spirituelle* is a French-language journal that offers reflections on the Christian life and the life of prayer, and which frequently featured the writings of Père Lagrange.

² The “hebdomadarian” is the priest assigned to celebrate the conventual Mass and lead the Liturgy of the Hours. It is a position held for one week at a time and rotates among the priests within the community. The blessed to whom Père Lagrange refers is Bl. Christopher of Milan, O.P..

This essay first appeared in French as “Julien l’Apostat prédicateur de retraites sacerdotales.” in: *La Vie Spirituelle*, supplément 17 (1928): 242-248.