

STRENGTH & DECENCY

Address at the quarterly meeting of the Society of the Holy Name of Brooklyn and Long Island

Oyster Bay, New York – August 16, 1903

I am particularly glad to see such a society as this flourishing as your society has flourished, because the future welfare of our nation depends upon the way in which we can combine in our men - in our young men - decency and strength. Just this morning when attending service on the great battleship Kearsarge I listened to a sermon addressed to the officers and enlisted men of the navy, in which the central thought was that each American must be a good man or he could not be a good citizen. And one of the things dwelt upon in that sermon was the fact that a man must be clean of mouth as well as clean of life - must show by his words as well as by his actions his fealty to the Almighty if he was to be what we have a right to expect from men wearing the national uniform. We have good Scriptural authority for the statement that it is not what comes into a man's mouth but what goes out of it that counts. I am not addressing weaklings, or I should not take the trouble to come here. I am addressing strong, vigorous men, who are engaged in the active hard work of life; and life to be worth living must be a life of activity and hard work. I am speaking to men engaged in the hard, active work of life, and therefore to men who will count for good or for evil.

It is peculiarly incumbent upon you who have strength to set a right example to others. I ask you to remember that you cannot retain your self-respect if you are loose and foul of tongue, that a man who is to lead a clean and honorable life must inevitably suffer if his speech likewise is not clean and honorable. Every man here knows the temptations that beset all of us in this world. At times any man will slip. I do not expect perfection, but I do expect genuine and sincere effort toward being decent and cleanly in thought, in word, and in deed.

As I said at the outset, I hail the work of this society as typifying one of those forces which tend to the betterment and uplifting of our social system. Our whole effort should be toward securing a combination of the strong qualities with those qualities which we term virtues. I expect you to be strong. I would not respect you if you were not. I do not want to see Christianity professed only by weaklings; I want to see it a moving spirit among men of strength. I do not expect you to lose one particle of your strength or courage by being decent. On the contrary, I should hope to see each man who is a member of this society, from his membership in it become all the fitter to do the rough work of the world; all the fitter to work in time of peace; and if, which may Heaven forbid, war should come, all the fitter to fight in time of war. I desire to see in this country the decent men strong and the strong men decent, and until we get that combination in pretty good shape we are not going to be by any means as successful as we should be.

There is always a tendency among very young men and among boys who are not quite young men as yet to think that to be wicked is rather smart; to think it shows that they are men. Oh, how often you see some young fellow who boasts that he is going to "see life," meaning by that that he is going to see that part of life which it is a thousandfold better should remain unseen! I ask that every man here constitute himself his brother's keeper by setting an example to that younger brother which will prevent him from getting such a false estimate of life. Example is the most potent of all things. If any one of you in the presence of younger boys, and especially the younger people of our own family, misbehave yourself, if you use coarse and blasphemous language before them, you can be sure that these younger people will follow your example and not your precept. It is no use to preach to them if you do not act decently yourself. You must feel that the most effective way in which you can preach is by your practice.

As I was driving up here a friend who was with us said that in his experience the boy who went out into life with a foul tongue was apt so to go because his kinsfolk, at least his intimate associates, themselves had foul tongues. The father, the elder brothers, the friends, can do much toward seeing that the boys as they become men become clean and honorable men.

I have told you that I wanted you not only to be decent, but to be strong. These boys will not admire virtue of a merely anaemic type. They believe in courage, in manliness. They admire those who have the quality of being brave, the quality of facing life as life should be faced, the quality that must stand at the root of good citizenship in peace or in war. If you are to be effective as good Christians you must possess strength and courage, or your example will count for little with the young, who admire strength and courage. I want to see you, the men of the Holy Name Society, you who embody the qualities which the younger people admire, by your example give those young people the tendency, the trend, in the right direction; and remember that this example counts in many other ways besides cleanliness of speech. I want to see every man able to hold his own with the strong, and also ashamed to oppress the weak. I want to see each young fellow able to do a man's work in the world, and of a type which will not permit imposition to be practised upon him. I want to see him too strong of spirit to submit to wrong, and, on the other hand, ashamed to do wrong to others. I want to see each man able to hold his own in the rough work of actual life outside, and also, when he is at home, a good man, unselfish in dealing with wife, or mother, or children. Remember that the preaching does not count if it is not backed up by practice. There is no good in your preaching to your boys to be brave if you run away. There is no good in your preaching to them to tell the truth if you do not. There is no good in your preaching to them to be unselfish if they see you selfish with your wife, disregarding of others. We have a right to expect that you will come together in meetings like this; that you will march in processions; that you will join in building up such a great and useful association as this; and, even more, we have a right to expect that in your own homes and among your own associates you will prove by your deeds that yours is not a lip-loyalty merely; that you show in actual practice the faith that is in you.