

John Colet

*The Sermon of Doctor Colet Made to the Convocation at Paul's (?1530)*

---

*A sermon delivered February 6, 1512, when Archbishop Warham had convened the clergy to consider ways of eradicating the recently revived Lollard heresy. Colet was assigned to give the preliminary sermon of the meeting, and chose to scourge not the Lollards but the bishops who sat before him. The sermon was delivered and published immediately in Latin (Oratio habita ad clerum in convocatione) in 1512.*

[1] Ye are come together today, fathers and right wise men, to enter council, in the which what ye will do and what matters ye will handle yet we understand not. But we wish that once, remembering your name and profession, ye would mind the reformation of the church's matter. For it was never more need, and the state of the church did never desire more your endeavors. For the Spouse of Christ, the church whom ye would should be "without spot or wrinkle," is made foul and evil-favored, as saith Esaias, "The faithful city is made an harlot"; and as saith Hieremias [Jeremiah], "She hat done lechery with many lovers, whereby she hat conceived many seeds of wickedness and daily bringeth forth very foul fruit."

[2] Wherefore I cam hither today, fathers, to warn you that in this your council with all your mind ye think upon the reformation of the church. But forsooth I came not willingly, for I knew mine unworthiness. I saw, beside, how hard it was to please the precise judgment of so many men. For I judged it utterly unworthy and unmeet, yea, and almost too malapert, that I, a servant, should counsel my lords; that I, a son, should teach you, my fathers. Truly, it had been meeter for some one of the fathers; that is to say, you prelates might have done it with more grave authority and greater wisdom. But the commandment was to be obeyed of the Most Reverent Father and Lord the Archbishop, president of this council, which laid upon me this burden, truly too heavy for me. We read that the prophet Samuel said, "Obedience is better than sacrifice." Wherefore, fathers and right worthy men, I pray you and beseech you that this day ye would sustain my weakness with your goodness and patience; furthermore, to help me at the beginning with your good prayers.....

[3] To exhort you, reverent fathers, to the endeavor of reformation of the church's estate (because that nothing hath so disfigured the face of the church as hat the fashion of secular and worldly living in clerks and priests) I know not where more conveniently to take the beginning of my tale than of the Apostle Paul, in whose temple ye are gathered together. For he, writing unto the Romans, and under their name unto you, saith, "Be you not conformed

to this world, but be you reformed in the newness of your understanding, that ye may prove what is the good will of God, well-pleasing and perfect." This did the apostle write to all the Christian men, but most chiefly unto priests and bishops. Priests and bishops are the light of the world. For unto them said our Savior, "You are the light of the world." And he said also, "If the light that is in thee be darkness, how dark shall the darkness be?" That is to say, if priests and bishops, that should be as lights, run in the dark way of the world, how dark than shall the secular people be? Wherefore Saint Paul said chiefly unto priests and bishops, "Be you not conformable to this world, but be ye reformed."

[4] In the which words the apostle doth two things. First, he doth forbid that we be not conformable to the world and be made carnal. Furthermore, he doth command that we be reformed in the spirit of God, whereby we are spiritual.

[5] I intending to follow this order, I will speak first of conformation, then after of reformation....

[6] And first for to speak of pride of life how much greediness and appetite of honor and dignity is nowadays in men of the church! How run they, yea, almost out of breath, from one benefice to another, from the less to the more, from the lower to the higher! Who seeth not this? Who, seeing this, sorroweth not? Moreover, these that are in the same dignities, the most part of them doth go with so stately a countenance and with so high looks that they seem not to be put in the humble bishopric of Christ, but rather in the high lordship and power of the world, not knowing nor advertizing what Christ, the master of all meekness, said unto his disciples, whom he called to be bishops and priests. "The princes of people," saith he, "have lordship of them, and those that be in authority have power; but do ye not so; but he that is greater among you, let him be minister; he that is highest in dignity, be he the servant of all men. The Son of Man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister." By which words our Savior doth plainly teach that the mastery in the church is non other thing than administration, and the high dignity in a man of the church to be none other thing than a meek service.

[7] The second secular evil is carnal concupiscence. Hath not this vice so grown and waxen in the church as a flood of their lust, so that there is nothing looked for more diligently in this most busy time of the most part of priests than that that doth delight and please the sense? They

give themselves to feasts and banqueting; they spend themselves in vain babbling; they give themselves to sports and plays; they apply themselves to hunting and hawking; they drown themselves in the delights of this world. Procurers and finders of lusts they set by. Against the which kind of men Judas the apostle crieth out in his epistle, saying: “Wo unto them which have gone the way of Cain. They are fowl and beastly, feasting in their meats, without fear feeding themselves; floods of the wild sea, foaming, foaming out their confusions; unto whom the storm of darkness is reserved for everlasting.”

[8] Covetousness is the third secular evil, the which Saint John the apostle calleth concupiscence of the eyes. Saint Paul calleth it idolatry. This abominable pestilence hath so entered in the mind almost of all priests, and so hath blinded the eyes of the mind, that we are blind to all things but only unto those which seem to bring unto us some gains. For what other thing seek we nowadays in the church than fat benefices and high promotions? Yea, and in the same promotions, of what other thing do we pass upon than of our tithes and rents, that we care not how many, how chargeful, how great benefices we take so that they be of great value? O covetousness! Saint Paul justly called thee the root of all evil. Of thee cometh this heaping of benefices upon benefices. Of thee, so great pensions assigned of many benefices, resigned. Of thee, all the suing for tithes, for offering, for mortuaries, for delapidations—by the right and title of the church! For the which thing we strive no less than for our own life. O covetousness! Of thee cometh these chargeful visitations of bishops. Of thee cometh the corruptness of courts, and these daily new inventions wherewith the silly people are so sore vexed. Of thee cometh the besity and wantonness of officials. O covetousness, mother of all iniquity, of thee cometh this fervent study of ordinaries to dilate their jurisdictions. Of thee cometh this wood and raging contention in ordinaries; of thee, insinuation of testaments; of thee cometh the undue sequestration of fruits; of thee cometh the undue sequestration of fruits; of thee cometh the superstitious observing of all those laws that sound to any lucre, setting aside and despising those that concern the amendment of manners. What should I rehearse the rest? To be short, and to conclude at one word: all corruptness, all the decay of the church, all the offenses of the world come of the covetousness of priests; according to that of Saint Paul, that here I repeat again and beat into your ears, “Covetousness is the root of all evil.”

[9] The fourth secular evil that spotteth and maketh ill-favored the face of the church is the continual secular

occupation wherein priests and bishops nowadays doth busy themselves, the servants rather of men than of God, the warriors rather of this world than of Christ... Without doubt, of this secularity, and that clerks and priests, leaving all spiritualness, do turmoil themselves with earthly occupations, many evils do follow.

[10] First, the dignity of priesthood is dishonored, the which is greater than other the kings or emperors'; it is equal with the dignity of angels. But the brightness of this great dignity is sore shadowed when priests are occupied in earthly things, whose conversation ought to be in heaven.

[11] Secondly, priesthood is despised when there is no difference betwixt such priests and lay people, but according to the prophecy of Ozee [Hosea], “As the people be, so are the priests.”

[12] Thirdly, the beautiful order and holy dignity in the church is confused when the highest in the church do meddle with vile and earthly things, and in their stead vile and abject persons do exercise high and heavenly things.

[13] Fourthly, the lay people have great occasion of evils, and cause to fall, when those men whose duty is to draw men from the affection of this world by their continual conversation in this world teach men to love this world, and of the love of the world cast them down headlong into hell...

[14] These be the four evils that I have spoken of, O fathers, O priests, by the which we are conformable to this world, by the which the face of the church is made evil-favored, by the which the state of it is destroyed truly much more than it was in the beginning by the persecution of tyrants or afterward by the invasion that followed of heretics. For in the persecution of tyrants the church, being vexed, was made stronger and brighter. In the invasion of heretics the church, being shaken, was made wiser and more cunning in Holy Writ. But since this secularity was brought in, after that the secular manner of living crept in in the men of the church, the root of all spiritual life—that is to say, charity—was extinct. The which taken away, there can nother wise nor strong church be in God...

[15] Wherefore, you fathers, you priests, and all you of the clergy, at the last look up and awake from this your sleep in this forgetful world; and at the last, being well awakened, hear Paul crying unto you, “Be you not conformable unto this world.”

[16] And this for the first part. Now let us come to the second.

[17] The Second Part, of Reformation

“But be you reformed in the newness of your understanding”

[18] The second thing that Saint Paul commanded is that we be reformed into a new understanding, that we smell those things that be of God. Be we reformed unto those things that are contrary to those I spake of even now, that is to say, to meekness, to soberness, to charity, to spiritual occupation—that, as the said Paul writeth unto Titus, “Renying all wickedness and worldly desires, we live in this world soberly, truly, and virtuously.”

[19] This reformation and restoring of the church’s estate must needs begin of you, our fathers, and so follow in us your priests and in all the clergy. You are our heads, you are an example of living unto us. Unto you we look as unto marks of our direction. In you and in your life we desire to read, as in lively books, how and after what fashion we may live. Wherefore, if you will ponder and look upon our motes, first take away the blocks out of your eyes. It is an old proverb, “Physician, heal thyself.” You spiritual physician, first taste your medicine of purgation of manners, and then after offer us the same to taste.

[20] The way whereby the church may be reformed into better fashion is not for to make new laws. For there be laws many enough and out of number, as Salomon saith: “Nothing is new under the sun.” For the evils that are now in the church were before in time past, and there is no fault but that fathers have provided very good remedies for it. There are no trespasses but that there be laws against them in the body of the Canon Law. Therefore, it is no need that new laws and constitutions be made, but that those that are made already be kept. Wherefore in this your assembly let those laws that are made be called before you and rehearsed—those laws, I say, that restrain vice and those that further virtue.

[21] First, let those laws be rehearsed that do warn you fathers that ye put not oversoon your hands on every man, or admit unto holy orders. For there is the well of evils, that, the broad gate of holy orders opened, every man that offereth himself is all-where admitted without pulling back. Thereof springeth and cometh out the people that are in the church both of unlearned and evil priests. It is not enough for a priest, after my judgment, to construe a collette, to put forth a question, or to answer to a

sopheme; but much more a good, a pure, and a holy life, approved manners, meetly learning of Holy Scripture, some knowledge of the sacraments; chiefly and above all things, the fear of God and love of the heavenly life.

[22] Let the laws be rehearsed that command that benefices of the church be given to those that are worthy, an that promotions be made in the church by the right balance of virtue, not by carnal affection, not by the acceptance of persons; whereby it happeneth nowadays that boys for old men, fools for wise men, evil for good, do reign and rule.

[23] Let the laws be rehearsed that warreth against the spot of simony. The which corruption, the which infection, the which cruel and odible pestilence so creepeth now abroad as the canker evil in the minds of priests that many of them are not afeard nowadays both by prayer and service, rewards and promises, to get them great dignities.

[24] Let the laws be rehearsed that command personal residence of curate sin their churches. For of this many evils grow, because all things nowadays are done by vicaries and parish priests, yea, and those foolish also and unmeet, and oftentimes wicked, that seek none other thing in the people than foul lucre, whereof cometh occasion of evil heresies and ill Christendom in the people.

[25] Let be rehearsed the laws and holy rules, given of fathers, of the life and honesty of clerks; that forbid that a clerk be no merchant, that he be no usurer, that he be no hunter, that he be no common player, that he bear no weapon; the laws that forbid clerks to haunt taverns, that forbid them to have suspect familiarity with women; the laws that command soberness and a measurableness in apparel and temperance in adorning of the body....

[26] Above all things, let the laws be rehearsed that pertain and concern you, my reverent fathers and lord-bishops, laws of your just and canonical election in the chapters of your churches, with the calling of the Holy Ghost. For because that is not done nowadays, and because prelates are chosen oftentimes more by favor of men than by the grace of God, therefor truly have we not a few times bishops full little spiritual men, rather worldly than heavenly, savoring more the spirit of this world than the spirit of Christ....

[27] Let the laws be rehearsed of the good bestowing of the patrimony of Christ, the laws that command that the goods of the church be spent not in costly building, not in

sumptuous apparel and pomps, not in feasting and banketing, not in excess and wantonness, not in enriching of kinsfolk, not in keeping of dogs, but in things profitable and necessary to the church....

[28] At the last let be renewed those laws and constitutions of fathers of the celebration of councils, that command provincial councils to be oftener used for the reformation of the church. For there never happeneth nothing more hurtful to the church of Christ than the lack both of council general and provincial....

[29] Forsooth, if you keep the laws, and if you reform first your life to the rules of the Canon Laws, then shall ye give us light, in the which we may see what is to be done of our part—that is to say, the light of your good example. And we, seeing our fathers so keeping the laws, will gladly follow the steps of our fathers.

[30] The clergy's and spiritual's part once reformed in the church, then may we with a just order proceed to the reformation of the lay's part, the which truly will be very easy to do if we first be reformed. For the body followed the soul, and such rulers as are in the city, like dwellers be in it. Wherefore, if priests that have the charge of souls be good, straight the people will be good. Our goodness shall teach them more clearly to be good than all other teachings and preachings. Our goodness shall compel them into the right way truly more effectuously than all your suspendings and cursings....

[31] These are they, reverent fathers and right famous men, that I thought to be said for the reformation of the church's estate. I trust ye will take them of your gentleness to the best. An dif peradventure it be thought that I have passed my bounds in this sermon, or have said anything out of temper, forgive it me; and ye shall forgive a man speaking of very zeal, a man sorrowing the decay of the church. And consider the thing itself, not regarding any foolishness. Consider the miserable form and state of the church and endeavor yourselves with all your minds to reform it. Suffer not, fathers, this your so great a gathering to depart in vain. Suffer not this your congregation to slip for naught. Truly, ye are gathered oftentimes together, but, by your favor to spake the truth, yet I see not what fruit cometh of your assembling, namely to the church.

[32] Go ye now in the Spirit that ye have called on that, by the help of it, ye may in this your council find out, discern, and ordain those things that may be profitable to the church, praise unto you, and honor unto God. Unto whom be all honor and glory forever more. Amen.