On the Public Shows

Pseudo-Cyprian (3rd century and later)

SermonIndex.net / Church Fathers

Authorship. These four short works were handed down with Cyprian's writings but are not by him; they come from various unknown authors, mostly of the third century.

On the Public Shows

Argument. -The Writer First of All Treats Against Those Who Endeavoured to Defend the Public Exhibitions of the Heathens by Scriptural Authority; And He Proves That, Although They are Never Prohibited by the Express Words of Scripture, Yet that They are Condemned in the Scriptural Prohibition of Idolatry, from the Fact that There is No Kind of Public Show Which is Not Consecrated to Idols.

1. Cyprian to the congregation who stand fast in the Gospel, sends greeting. As it greatly saddens me, and deeply afflicts my soul, when no opportunity of writing to you is presented to me, for it is my loss not to hold converse with you; so nothing restores to me such joyfulness and hilarity, as when that opportunity is once more afforded me. I think that I am with you when I am speaking to you by letter. Although, therefore, I know that you are satisfied that what I tell you is even as I say, and that you have no doubt of the truth of my words, nevertheless an actual proof will also attest the reality of the matter. For my affection (for you) is proved, when absolutely no opportunity (of writing) is passed over. However certain I may be, then, that you are no less respectable in the conduct of your life than faithful in respect of your sacramental vow; still, since there are not wanting smooth-tongued advocates of vice, and indulgent patrons who afford authority to vices, and, what is worse, convert the rebuke of the heavenly Scriptures into an advocacy of crimes; as if the pleasure derived from the public exhibitions might be sought after as being innocent, by way of a mental relaxation;-for thereby the vigour of ecclesiastical discipline is so relaxed, and is so deteriorated by all the languor of vice that it is no longer apology, but authority, that is given for wickedness,-it seemed good in a few words not now to instruct you, but to admonish you who are instructed, lest, because the wounds are badly bound up, they should break through the cicatrix of their closed soundness. For no mischief is put an end to with so much difficulty but that its recurrence is easy, so long as it is both maintained by the consent, and caressed by the excuses of the multitude.

2. Believers, and men who claim for themselves the authority of the Christian name, are not ashamed-are not, I repeat, ashamed to find a defence in the heavenly Scriptures for the vain superstitions associated with the public exhibitions of the heathens, and thus to attribute divine authority to idolatry. For how is it, that what is done by the heathens in honour of any idol is resorted to in a public show by faithful Christians, and the heathen idolatry is

maintained, and the true and divine religion is trampled upon in contempt of God? Shame binds me to relate their pretexts and defences in this behalf. "Where," say they, "are there such Scriptures? where are these things prohibited? On the contrary, both Elias is the charioteer of Israel, and David himself danced before the ark. We read of psalteries, horns, trumpets, drums, pipes, harps, and choral dances. Moreover, the apostle, in his struggle, puts before us the contest of the Caestus, and of our wrestle against the spiritual things of wickedness. Again, when he borrows his illustrations from the racecourse, he also proposes the prize of the crown. Why, then, may not a faithful Christian man gaze upon that which the divine pen might write about? "At this point I might not unreasonably say that it would have been far better for them not to know any writings at all, than thus to read the Scriptures. For words and illustrations which are recorded by way of exhortation to evangelical virtue, are translated by them into pleas for vice; because those things are written of, not that they should be gazed upon, but that a greater eagerness might be aroused in our minds in respect of things that will benefit us, seeing that among the heathens there is manifest so much eagerness in respect of things which will be of no advantage.

3. These are therefore an argument to stimulate virtue, not a permission or a liberty to look upon heathen error, that by this consideration the mind may be more inflamed to Gospel virtue for the sake of the divine rewards, since through the suffering of all these labours and pains it is granted to attain to eternal benefits. For that Elias is the charioteer of Israel is no defence for gazing upon the public games; for he ran his race in no circus. And that David in the presence of God led the dances, is no sanction for faithful Christians to occupy seats in the public theatre; for David did not twist his limbs about in obscene movements, to represent in his dancing the story of Grecian lust. Psalteries, horns, pipes, drums, harps, were used in the service of the Lord, and not of idols. Let it not on this account be objected that unlawful things may be gazed upon; for by the artifice of the devil these are changed from things holy to things unlawful. Then let shame demur to these things, even if the Holy Scriptures cannot. For there are certain things wherein the Scripture is more careful in giving instruction. Acquiescing in the claim of modesty, it has forbidden more where it has been silent. The truth, if it descended low enough to deal with such things, would think very badly of its faithful votaries. For very often, in matters of precept, some things are advantageously said nothing about; they often remind when they are expressly forbidden.

So also there is an implied silence even in the writings of the Scripture; and severity speaks in the place of precepts; and reason teaches where Scripture has held its peace. Let every man only take counsel with himself, and let him speak consistently with the character of his profession, and then he will never do any of these things. For that conscience will have more weight which shall be indebted to none other than itself.

4. What has Scripture interdicted? Certainly it has forbidden gazing upon what it forbids to be done. It condemned, I say, all those kinds of exhibitions when it abrogated idolatry-the mother of all public amusements, whence these prodigies of vanity and lightness came. For what public exhibition is without an idol? what amusement without a sacrifice? what

contest is not consecrated to some dead person? And what does a faithful Christian do in the midst of such things as these? If he avoids idolatry, why does he who is now sacred take pleasure in things which are worthy of reproach? Why does he approve of superstitions which are opposed to God, and which he loves while he gazes upon them? Besides, let him be aware that all these things are the inventions of demons, not of God. He is shameless who in the church exorcises demons while he praises their delights in public shows; and although, once for all renouncing him, he has put away everything in baptism, when he goes to the devil's exhibition after (receiving) Christ, he renounces Christ as much as (he had done) the devil. Idolatry, as I have already said, is the mother of all the public amusements; and this, in order that faithful Christians may come under its influence, entices them by the delight of the eyes and the ears. Romulus was the first who consecrated the games of the circus to Consus as the god of counsel, in reference to the rape of the Sabine women.

But the rest of the scenic amusements were provided to distract the attention of the people while famine invaded the city, and were subsequently dedicated to Ceres and Bacchus, and to the rest of the idols and dead men. Those Grecian contests, whether in poems, or in instrumental music, or in words, or in personal prowess, have as their guardians various demons; and whatever else there is which either attracts the eyes or allures the ears of the spectators, if it be investigated in reference to its origin and institution, presents as its reason either an idol, or a demon, or a dead man. Thus the devil, who is their original contriver, because he knew that naked idolatry would by itself excite repugnance, associated it with public exhibitions, that for the sake of their attraction it might be loved.

5. What is the need of prosecuting the subject further, or of describing the unnatural kinds of sacrifices in the public shows, among which sometimes even a man becomes the victim by the fraud of the priest, when the gore, yet hot from the throat, is received in the foaming cup while it still steams, and, as if it were thrown into the face of the thirsting idol, is brutally drunk in pledge to it; and in the midst of the pleasures of the spectators the death of some is eagerly besought, so that by means of a bloody exhibition men may learn fierceness, as if a man's own private frenzy were of little account to him unless he should learn it also in public? For the punishment of a man, a rabid wild beast is nourished with delicacies, that he may become the more cruelly ferocious under the eyes of the spectators. The skilful trainer instructs the brute, which perhaps might have been more merciful had not its more brutal master taught it cruelty. Then, to say nothing of whatever idolatry more generally recommends, how idle are the contests themselves; strifes in colours, contentions in races, acclamations in mere questions of honour; rejoicing because a horse has been more fleet, grieving because it was more sluggish, reckoning up the years of Cattle, knowing the consuls under whom they ran, learning their age, tracing their breed, recording their very grandsires and great-grand-sires! How unprofitable a matter is all this; nay, how disgraceful and ignominious!

This very man, I say, who can compute by memory the whole family of his equine race, and can relate it with great quickness without interfering with the exhibition-were you

to inquire of this man who were the parents of Christ, he cannot tell, or he is the more unfortunate if he can. But if, again, I should ask him by what road he has come to that exhibition, he will confess (that he has come) by the naked bodies of prostitutes and of profligate women, by (scenes of) public lust, by public disgrace, by vulgar lasciviousness, by the common contempt of all men. And, not to object to him what perchance he has done, still he has seen what was not fit to be done, and he has trained his eyes to the exhibition of idolatry by lust: he would have dared, had he been able, to take that which is holy into the brothel with him; since, as he hastens to the spectacle when dismissed from the Lord's table, and still bearing within him, as often occurs, the Eucharist, that unfaithful man has carried about the holy body of Christ among the filthy bodies of harlots, and has deserved a deeper condemnation for the way by which he has gone thither, than for the pleasure he has received from the exhibition.

6. But now to pass from this to the shameless corruption of the stage. I am ashamed to tell what things are said; I am even ashamed to denounce the things that are done-the tricks of arguments, the cheatings of adulterers, the immodesties of women, the scurrile jokes, the sordid parasites, even the toga'd fathers of families themselves, sometimes stupid, sometimes obscene, but in all cases dull, in all cases immodest. And though no individual, or family, or profession, is spared by the discourse of these reprobates, yet every one flocks to the play. The general infamy is delightful to see or to recognise; it is a pleasure, nay, even to learn it. People flock thither to the public disgrace of the brothel for the teaching of obscenity, that nothing less may be done in secret than what is learnt in public; and in the midst of the laws themselves is taught everything that the laws forbid. What does a faithful Christian do among these things, since he may not even think upon wickedness? Why does he find pleasure in the representations of lust, so as among them to lay aside his modesty and become more daring in crimes? He is learning to do, while he is becoming accustomed to see. Nevertheless, those women whom their misfortune has introduced and degraded to this slavery, conceal their public wantonness, and find consolation for their disgrace in their concealment. Even they who have sold their modesty blush to appear to have done so.

But that public prodigy is transacted in the sight of all, and the obscenity of prostitutes is surpassed. A method is sought to commit adultery with the eyes. To this infamy an infamy fully worthy of it is super added: a human being broken down in every limb, a man melted to something beneath the effeminacy of a woman, has found the art to supply language with his hands; and on behalf of one-I know not what, but neither man nor woman-the whole city is in a state of commotion, that the fabulous debaucheries of antiquity may be represented in a ballet. Whatever is not lawful is so beloved, that what had even been lost sight of by the lapse of time is brought back again into the recollection of the eyes.

7. It is not sufficient for lust to make use of its present means of mischief, unless by the exhibition it makes its own that in which a former age had also gone wrong. It is not lawful, I say, for faithful Christians to be present; it is not lawful, I say, at all, even for those whom for the delight of their ears Greece sends everywhere to all who are instructed in

her vain arts. One imitates the hoarse warlike clangours of the trumpet; another with his breath blowing into a pipe regulates its mournful sounds; another with dances, and with the musical voice of a man, strives with his breath, which by an effort he had drawn from his bowels into the upper parts of his body, to play upon the stops of pipes; now letting forth the sound, and now closing it up inside, and forcing it into the air by certain openings of the stops; now breaking the sound in measure, he endeavours to speak with his fingers, ungrateful to the Artificer who gave him a tongue. Why should I speak of comic and useless efforts? Why of those great tragic vocal ravings? Why of strings set vibrating with noise? These things, even if they were not dedicated to idols, ought not to be approached and gazed upon by faithful Christians; because, even if they were not criminal, they are characterized by a worthlessness which is extreme, and which is little suited to believers.

8. Now that other folly of others is an obvious source of advantage to idle men; and the first victory is for the belly to be able to crave food beyond the human limit,-a flagitious traffic for the claim to the crown of gluttony: the wretched face is hired out to bear wounding blows, that the more wretched belly may be gorged. How disgusting, besides, are those struggles! Man lying below man is enfolded in abominable embraces and twinings. In such a contest, whether a man looks on or conquers, still his modesty is conquered. Behold, one naked man bounds forth towards you; another with straining powers tosses a brazen ball into the air. This is not glory, but folly. In fine, take away the spectator, and you will have shown its emptiness. Such things as these should be avoided by faithful Christians, as I have frequently said already; spectacles so vain, so mischievous, so sacrilegious, from which both our eyes and our ears should be guarded. We quickly get accustomed to what we hear and what we see. For since man's mind is itself drawn towards vice, what will it do if it should have inducements of a bodily nature as well as a downward tendency in its slippery will? What will it do if it should be impelled from without? Therefore the mind must be called away from such things as these.

9. The Christian has nobler exhibitions, if he wishes for them. He has true and profitable pleasures, if he will recollect himself. And to say nothing of those which he cannot yet contemplate, he has that beauty of the world to look upon and admire. He may gaze upon the sun's rising, and again on its setting, as it brings round in their mutual changes days and nights; the moon's orb, designating in its waxings and warnings the courses of the seasons; the troops of shining stars, and those which glitter from on high with extreme mobility,-their members divided through the changes of the entire year, and the days themselves with the nights distributed into hourly periods; the heavy mass of the earth balanced by the mountains, and the flowing rivers with their sources; the expanse of seas, with their waves and shores; and meanwhile, the air, subsisting equally everywhere in perfect harmony, expanded in the midst of all, and in concordant bonds animating all things with its delicate life, now scattering showers from the contracted clouds, now recalling the serenity of the sky with its refreshed purity; and in all these spheres their appropriate tenants-in the air the birds, in the waters the fishes, on the earth man. Let these, I say, and other divine works, be the exhibitions for faithful Christians. What theatre built by human hands could

ever be compared to such works as these? Although it may be reared with immense piles of stones, the mountain crests are loftier; and although the fretted roofs glitter with gold, they will be surpassed by the brightness of the starry firmament. Never will any one admire the works of man, if he has recognised himself as the son of God. He degrades himself from the height of his nobility, who can admire anything but the Lord.

10. Let the faithful Christian, I say, devote himself to the sacred Scriptures, and there he shall find worthy exhibitions for his faith. He will see God establishing His world, and making not only the other animals, but that marvellous and better fabric of man. He will gaze upon the world in its delightfulness, righteous shipwrecks, the rewards of the good, and the punIshments of the impious, seas drained dry by a people, and again from the rock seas spread out by a people. He will behold harvests descending from heaven, not pressed in by the plough; rivers with their hosts of waters bridled in, exhibiting dry crossings. He will behold in some cases faith struggling with the flame, wild beasts overcome by devotion and soothed into gentleness. He will look also upon souls brought back even from death. Moreover, he will consider the marvellous souls brought back to the life of bodies which themselves were already consumed. And in all these things he will see a still greater exhibition-that devil who had triumphed over the whole world lying prostrate under the feet of Christ. How honourable is this exhibition, brethren! how delightful, how needful ever to gaze upon one's hope, and to open our eyes to one's salvation! This is a spectacle which is beheld even when sight is lost. This is an exhibition which is given by neither praetor nor consul, but by Him who is alone and above all things, and before all things, yea, and of whom are all things, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom be glory and honour for ever and ever. I bid you, brethren, ever heartily farewell. Amen.

Authorship. These four short works were handed down with Cyprian's writings but are not by him; they come from various unknown authors, mostly of the third century.

Source. English translation: an older public-domain translation as collected in the Writings-Database (HistoricalChristianFaith), mostly from the Ante-Nicene, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers and similar nineteenth-century editions. SermonIndex has only divided it into chapters and short sections; the wording is the translator's own. Square brackets, Greek or Latin words and footnote-free text are as the source file prints them, and a transcription error may remain. No Greek or Latin text is shown beside it yet, and no modern English version has been made.