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*The Arts and
the Spirit of the Lord*

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The Arts and the Spirit of the Lord

BOYD K. PACKER

I am particularly appreciative of the music we've just heard, and quote from section 25 of the Doctrine and Covenants:

For my soul delighteth in the song of the heart; yea, the song of the righteous is a prayer unto me, and it shall be answered with a blessing upon their heads. [D&C 25:12]

I very anxiously lay claim to those blessings from these righteous young men and women who have sung so beautifully this sacred hymn of Zion. My gratitude to them will, I'm sure, be more obvious when I move into the message that I have chosen to speak upon tonight.

I want to respond to a question that I face with some frequency. It has many variations, but the theme is this: Why do we not have more inspired and inspiring music in the Church? Or why do we have so few great paintings or sculptures depicting the Restoration? Why is it when we need a new painting for a bureau of information, or perhaps for a temple, frequently nonmember painters receive the commission? The same questions have an application to poetry, to drama, to dance, to creative writing, to all the fine arts.

Now, I'm sure there are those who will say, "Why does he presume to talk about that? He is uninformed. He is just out of his province." It may comfort them to know that I know that. My credentials to speak do not come from being a musician, for I'm not. I am not a composer, nor a conductor, and certainly I am not a vocalist. I cannot, for example, play the piano. I would be very unwilling to do so. However, should I be pressed to it, I could, without much difficulty, prove my point. I am not adequate as an artist, nor as a sculptor, a poet, or a writer.

But then I do not intend to train you in any of those fields. My credentials, if I have any (some of them should be obvious), relate to spiritual things.

I hope for sufficient inspiration to comment on how the Spirit of the Lord influences or is influenced by the art forms that I have mentioned. Since I have been interested in these matters, I have, over the years, listened very carefully when they have been discussed by

Boyd K. Packer was a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints when this fireside address was given at Brigham Young University on 1 February 1976.

the Brethren. I have studied expressions of my Brethren and of those who have led us in times past, in order to determine how those questions should be answered.

The reason we have not yet produced a greater heritage in art and literature and music and drama is not, I am very certain, because we have not had talented people. For over the years we have had not only good ones but great ones. Some have reached great heights in their chosen fields. But few have captured the spirit of the gospel of Jesus Christ and the restoration of it in music, in art, in literature. They have not, therefore, even though they were gifted, made a lasting contribution to the onrolling of the Church and kingdom of God in the dispensation of the fulness of times. They have therefore missed doing what they might have done, and they have missed being what they might have become. I am reminded of the statement "There are many who struggle and climb and finally reach the top of the ladder, only to find that it is leaning against the wrong wall."

If you are willing to listen, I would like to express some concerns I have had over these matters and describe to you some disappointments I have heard expressed among the leaders of the Church.

Because I intend to be quite direct in my comments, I am a bit concerned. For I know when we touch this subject we talk of people who are very gifted. And people who are very gifted, it would seem, tend to be temperamental.

We were discussing some time ago the music and musicians of the Church, when one of the Twelve pointed out that it may be difficult to get instruction across because some of our musicians, among others, have a tendency to be temperamental. "Yes," observed one of the senior members of our Quorum, "More temper than mental." That, I suppose, describes all of us at one time or another.

Before I continue, I want it clearly understood that we have in the Church tens of thousands of gifted people who not only have talent, but who are generous with it. Our gifted people are greatly needed in the Church.

The work of the Lord has been moved by the members in the wards and stakes and branches who have been blessed with special gifts and who use them unselfishly. Because of what they do, we are able to feel and learn very quickly through music, through art, through poetry some spiritual things that we would otherwise learn very slowly. All of us are indebted to them for their generous service. I am humbly grateful to those who render such service in the Church. But then it is only right that they should contribute.

You who have such talents might well ask, "Whence comes this gift?" And gift it is. You may have cultivated it and developed it, but it was given to you. Most of us do not have it. You were not more deserving than we, but you are a good deal more responsible. If you use your gift properly, opportunities for service are opened that will be beneficial eternally for you and for others.

Has it ever occurred to you that you may leave this life without it? If the gift is yours because of the shape of your vocal cords, or the strength of your lungs, or because of the coordination of your hands, or because your eye registers form and color, you may leave the gift behind. You may have to be content with what you have become, because you possessed it while you were here. It has not been revealed just how this would be. I rather suspect that those gifts which we use properly will stay with us beyond the veil. And I repeat, you who are gifted may not be more deserving, but you are much more responsible than the rest of us.

Elder Orson F. Whitney said:

We will yet have Miltons and Shakespeares of our own. God's ammunition is not exhausted. His

highest spirits are held in reserve for the latter times. In God's name and by His help we will build up a literature whose tops will touch the heaven, though its foundation may now be low on the earth.

[Lecture delivered at YMMIA conference, 3 June 1888, in Brian H. Stuy, comp. and ed., *Collected Discourses*, vol. 1 (Burbank, California: B.H.S. Publishing, 1987), p. 154]

Since that statement was made in 1888, those foundations have been raised up very slowly. The greatest poems are not yet written, nor the paintings finished. The greatest hymns and anthems of the Restoration are yet to be composed. The sublimest renditions of them are yet to be conducted. We move forward much slower than need be, and I would like to underline some things that stand in our way.

You will quickly notice that I refer frequently to music. There is a reason for that. We use it more often. But the point that I shall make about the musician applies to all the arts: painting, poetry, drama, dance, and others.

For some reason it takes a constant vigilance on the part of priesthood leaders—both general and local—to ensure that music presented in our worship and devotional services is music that is appropriate for worship and devotional services. I have heard presidents of the Church declare after a general conference, or after a temple dedication, words to this effect (and I am quoting verbatim from one such experience):

I suppose we did not give enough attention to the music. It seems that our musicians must take such liberties. Something spiritual was lost from our meetings because the music was not what it should have been. Next time we must remember to give them more careful instructions.

Why is it that the president of the Church, or the president of the stake, or the bishop of the ward must be so attentive in arranging music for worship services and conference

meetings? Why should the anxiety persist that, if the musicians are left to do what they want to do, the result will not invite the Spirit of the Lord?

I have in the past made not altogether successful attempts to set a mood of devotion on a very sacred subject, having been invited to the pulpit immediately after a choir or choral number that was well performed but did nothing to inspire the spirit of devotion; or after a brass ensemble has rendered music that has nothing to do with spiritual inspiration.

The selections, which for other purposes might have been admirable, even impressive, failed in their inspiration simply because they were not appropriate. For some other gathering, some other time, some other place, yes—but they did not do what the hymns of the Restoration could have done. How sad when a gifted person has no real sense of propriety!

Let me illustrate this matter of propriety. Suppose you sponsor a pep rally in the stadium with the purpose of exciting the student body to a high point of enthusiasm. Suppose you invite someone to present a musical number with the expectation that the music would contribute to your purpose. Imagine him playing a sonata on an organ in subdued tones that lulls everyone into a contemplative and reflective mood. However well composed the music, or however well performed, it would not be appropriate for the occasion.

This example, of course, is obvious. It makes me wonder, therefore, why we must be constantly alert to have appropriate music in our sacrament meetings, conference sessions, and other worship services. Music and art and dance and literature can be very appropriate in one place and in one setting and for one purpose and be very wrong in another. That can be true of instruments as well.

We have, in our instruction to the musicians of the Church, this suggestion:

Organs and pianos are the standard musical instruments used in sacrament meetings. Other instruments, such as orchestral strings, may be used when appropriate, but the music presented must be in keeping with the reverence and spirituality of the meeting. Brass and percussion instruments generally are not appropriate. [General Handbook of Instructions, 1976, p. 23]

We are under resistance from some highly trained musicians who insist that they can get as much inspiration from brass instruments or a guitar solo as from a choir. I believe that an organ perhaps could be played at a pep rally in a way to incite great enthusiasm. And I think a brass section could play a hymn in such a way as to be reverent and fitting in a worship service. But if it should happen, it would have to be an exception. We cannot convey a sacred message in an art form that is not appropriate and have anything spiritual happen. But there is a constant attempt to do it.

Several years ago one of the organizations of the Church produced a filmstrip. The subject matter was very serious and the script was well written. The producer provided a story board. A story board is a series of loose, almost scribbled sketches, sometimes with a little color brushed across them, to roughly illustrate each frame of the filmstrip. Very little work is invested in a story board. It is merely to give an idea and is always subject to revision.

Some members of the committee were amused by the story board itself. It had a loose, comical air about it. They decided to photograph the illustrations on the story board and use them in the filmstrip. They thought they would be quite amusing and entertaining.

When the filmstrip was reviewed by four members of the Council of the Twelve, it was rejected. It had to be made over again. Why? Because the art form used simply was not appropriate to the message. You just don't teach sacred, serious subjects with careless, scribbled illustrations.

Now, again to music. There have been a number of efforts to take sacred gospel themes and tie them to modern music in the hope of attracting our young people to the message. Few events in all of human history surpass the spiritual majesty of the First Vision. We would be ill-advised to describe that event, the visit of Elohim and Jehovah, in company with rock music, even soft rock music, or to take equally sacred themes and set them to a modern beat. I do not know how that can be done and result in increased spirituality. I think it cannot be done.

When highly trained artists insist, as they occasionally do, that they receive spiritual experience in tying a sacred gospel theme to an inappropriate art form, I must conclude that they do not know, not really, the difference between when the Spirit of the Lord is present and when it is not.

Very frequently when our musicians, particularly the more highly trained among them, are left to do what they want to do, they perform in such a way as to call attention to themselves and their ability. They do this rather than give prayerful attention to what will inspire. I do not mean "inspire" as the music or art of the world can inspire. I mean *inspire!*

They are not content to use the hymns and anthems of the Restoration, for such a presentation, they feel, will not demonstrate their full capacities. When pressed to do so, they may grudgingly put a hymn on the program. But it is obvious that their heart isn't in it, for the numbers they select themselves seem to say, "Now let us show you what we really can do."

We instruct stake presidents that "preference should be given to the singing of well-known hymns" at stake conferences (1976 Stake Conference Program Schedules).

I know there are those who think that our Church music is limited. Some with professional abilities evidently soon get very tired of it. They want to stray from it and reach out into the world. They present the argument that

many of the hymns in our hymnbook were not written for the Church or by members of the Church. I know that already. And some of them are not really as compelling as they might be. Their messages are not as specific as we could have if we produced our own. But by association they have taken on a meaning that reminds members of the Church, whenever they hear them, of the restoration of the gospel, of the Lord, and of His ministry.

Sometimes, to ensure that music will be appropriate, one of the hymns or anthems of the Restoration is specifically requested. "Oh, but they sang that last conference," our conductors will say. Indeed we did, and we preached the same gospel last conference also. The preaching of it over and over again gives it a familiar and a warm feeling. We build it into our lives.

As speakers we are not trying to impress the world with how talented we are as preachers. We are simply trying to get across, by repetition, if that's the only way, the sacred message that has been entrusted to us.

Those of us who lead the Church are not constantly seeking new doctrine to introduce. We simply teach over and over again that which was in the beginning. It is with great difficulty that we try to pass on to the next generation, in some form of purity, that which was given to us. We will lose it if we are not wise.

The musician may say, "Do you really want us to take those few familiar hymns and present them over and over again with no introduction of anything new?" No, that is not what I would want, but it is close.

What I would desire would be to have the hymns of the Restoration *characteristic* of our worship services, with others added if they are appropriate. There are a great many things from elsewhere that are very appropriate. Many numbers can be used in our worship services with complete propriety.

Our hymns speak the truth as far as they go. They could speak more of it if we had

more of them, specifically teaching the principles of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ.

If I had my way there would be many new hymns with lyrics near scriptural in their power, bonded to music that would inspire people to worship. Think how much we could be helped by another inspired anthem or hymn of the Restoration. Think how we could be helped by an inspired painting on a scriptural theme or depicting our heritage. How much we could be aided by a graceful and modest dance, by a persuasive narrative, or poem, or drama. We could have the Spirit of the Lord more frequently and in almost unlimited intensity if we would.

For the most part, we do without because the conductor wants to win the acclaim of the world. He does not play to the Lord, but to other musicians. The composer and the arranger want to please the world. The painter wants to be in style. And so our resources of art and music grow ever so gradually. And we find that there have marched through this grand parade of mortality men and women who were sublimely gifted, but who spent all, or most, in the world and for the world. And I repeat that they may well one day come to learn that "many men struggle to reach the top of the ladder, only to find that it is leaning against the wrong wall."

It is a mistake to assume that one can follow the ways of the world and then somehow, in a moment of intruded inspiration, compose a great anthem of the Restoration, or in a moment of singular inspiration paint the great painting. When it is done, it will be done by one who has yearned and tried and longed fervently to do it, not by one who has condescended to do it. It will take quite as much preparation and work as any masterpiece, and a different kind of inspiration.

There is a test you might apply if you are among the gifted. Ask yourself this question: When I am free to do what I really want to do, what will it be?

If you find that you are ashamed of our humble heritage in the arts, that ought to be something of a signal to you. Often artists are not free to create what they most desire because the market demands other things of them. But what about when you are free? Do you have a desire to produce what the Church needs? Or do you desire to convince the Church that it needs to change style so the world will feel comfortable with it? Although our artistic heritage as yet is relatively small, we are losing some of what we have—through neglect!

At the recent rededication of the St. George Temple each session was closed, as is traditional in a temple dedication, with the presentation of the “Hosanna Anthem.” The audience, on the signal from the conductor, joins with the choir on that part of the anthem known widely through the Church as “The Spirit of God Like a Fire Is Burning.” I sat through those sessions and carefully observed, with great sorrow, that fully 80 percent of those in the audience did not know the words.

We can lose our heritage. We have lost part of it. Let me cite an example in the field of poetry.

William Ernest Henley wrote “Invictus,” a proud, almost defiant expression that concludes:

*I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.*
[*Echoes*, 1888, No. 4, In Memoriam R. T. Hamilton Bruce (“Invictus”), stanza 4]

Some years ago an answer to “Invictus” was given. Let me quote it to you:

*Art thou in truth?
Then what of Him who bought thee with His blood?
Who plunged into devouring seas
And snatched thee from the flood?*

*Who bore for all our fallen race
What none but him could bear—*

*The God who died that man might live
And endless glory share.*

*Of what avail thy vaunted strength
Apart from His vast might?
Pray that His light may pierce the gloom
That thou mayest see aright.*

*Men are as bubbles on the wave,
As leaves upon the tree,
Thou, captain of thy soul! Forsooth,
Who gave that place to thee?*

*Free will is thine—free agency,
To wield for right or wrong;
But thou must answer unto Him
To whom all souls belong.*

*Bend to the dust that “head unbowed,”
Small part of life’s great whole,
And see in Him and Him alone,
The captain of thy soul.*
[“The Soul’s Captain,” *Improvement Era*, May 1926, opposite inside front cover]

And who wrote that? Orson F. Whitney of the Council of the Twelve Apostles, a gifted and inspired poet whose work is virtually unknown in the Church. Let me quote another of his poems:

*There’s a mountain named Stern Justice,
Tall and towering, gloomy, grand,
Frowning o’er a vale called Mercy,
Loveliest in all the land.*

*Great and mighty is the mountain,
But its snowy crags are cold,
And in vain the sunlight lingers
On the summit proud and bold.*

*There is warmth within the valley,
And I love to wander there,
’Mid the fountains and the flowers,
Breathing fragrance on the air.*

*Much I love the solemn mountain,
It doth meet my somber mood,
When, amid the muttering thunders,
O'er my soul the storm-clouds brood.*

*But when tears, like rain, have fallen
From the fountain of my woe,
And my soul has lost its fierceness,
Straight unto the vale I go;*

*Where the landscape, gently smiling,
O'er my heart pours healing balm,
And, as oil on troubled waters,
Brings from out its storm a calm.*

*Yes, I love both vale and mountain,
Ne'er from either would I part;
Each unto my life is needful,
Both are dear unto my heart.*

*For the smiling vale doth soften
All the rugged steep makes sad,
And from icy rocks meander
Rills that make the valley glad.*

[Orson F. Whitney, "The Mountain and the Vale," *The Poetical Writings of Orson F. Whitney* (Salt Lake City: Juvenile Instructor Office, 1889), p. 183]

Both of these poems are new to most of you. Why would that be? I think it more than a pity that work such as this remains unknown to most students and faculty—even to some of the faculty in the field of literature. It is sad when members of the faculty here would discard them in favor of assigning their students to read degenerate compositions that issue from the minds of perverted and wicked men.

There is the temptation for college teachers, in the Church and outside of it, to exercise their authority to give assignments and thereby introduce their students to degradation under the argument that it is part of our culture. Teachers in the field of literature are particularly vulnerable.

I use the word *warning*. Such will not go unnoticed in the eternal scheme of things. Those who convey a degraded heritage to the next generation will reap disappointment by and by.

Teachers would do well to learn the difference between studying some things, as compared to studying *about* them. There is a great difference.

There is much to be said for a great effort to rediscover the humble and inspired contributions of gifted Saints of the past and thereby inspire the gifted in our day to produce works that will inspire those who come after us.

It is sad but true that, almost as a rule, our most gifted members are drawn to the world. They who are most capable to preserve our cultural heritage and to extend it, because of the enticements of the world, seek rather to replace it. That is so easy to do because for the most part they do not have that intent. They think that what they do is to improve it. Unfortunately many of them will live to learn that indeed, "Many men struggle to climb to reach the top of the ladder, only to find that it is leaning against the wrong wall."

I mentioned earlier that the greatest hymns and anthems have not been composed, nor have the greatest illustrations been set down, nor the poems written, nor the paintings finished. When they are produced, who will produce them? Will it be the most talented and the most highly trained among us? I rather think it will not. They will be produced by those who are the most inspired among us. Inspiration can come to those whose talents are barely adequate, and their contribution will be felt for generations; and the Church and kingdom of God will move forward just a little more easily because they have been here.

Some of our most gifted people struggle to produce a work of art, hoping that it will be described by the world as masterpiece! monumental! epic! when in truth the simple, compelling theme of "I Am a Child of God" has

moved and will move more souls to salvation than would such a work were they to succeed.

Some years ago I was chairman of a committee of seminary men responsible to produce a filmstrip on Church history. One of the group, Trevor Christensen, remembered that down in Sanpete County was a large canvas roll of paintings. They had been painted by one of his progenitors, C. C. A. Christensen, who traveled through the settlements giving a lecture on Church history as each painting was unrolled and displayed by lamplight. The roll of paintings had been stored away for generations. We sent a truck for them, and I shall not forget the day we unrolled it.

Brother Christensen was not masterful in his painting, but our heritage was there. Some said it was not great art, but what it lacked in technique was more than compensated in feeling. His work has been shown more widely and published more broadly and received more attention than that of a thousand and one others who missed that point.

I do not think Brother Christensen was a great painter, some would say not even a good one. I think his paintings are masterful. Why? Because the simple, reverent feeling he had for his spiritual heritage is captured in them. I do not think it strange that the world would honor a man who could not paint very well.

The ideal, of course, is for one with a gift to train and develop it to the highest possibility, including a sense of spiritual propriety. No artist in the Church who desires unselfishly to extend our heritage need sacrifice his career or an avocation, nor need he neglect his gift as only a hobby. He can meet the world and “best” it, and not be the loser. In the end, what appears to be such sacrifice will have been but a test.

Abraham did not have to kill Isaac, you know. He had to be willing to. Once that was known, that he would sacrifice his only begotten, he was known to be godlike and the blessings poured out upon him.

A few years ago Sister Packer and I were in Washington, D.C., to represent the Church at an awards banquet held in the reception hall of the Department of State. The elegant and stately surroundings, with a priceless collection of antiques and memorabilia, were impressive. Here, for instance, hangs the painting of George Washington by Gilbert Stuart and other priceless works of art. Both the occasion and the setting were ideal to make reference to the spiritual heritage of our country. And what was the program? A large brass section from one of the service bands played at great length, and with deafening volume, music from *Jesus Christ, Superstar*.

I sat next to a lovely, dignified woman, the wife of an officer of the government. When the crescendo weakened for a moment I was able to ask, by raising my voice a bit, if she was able to hear them all right. Her obvious amusement at the question soon changed to serious disappointment, as she asked in return, “What would Jesus think?”

That is well worth keeping in our minds if we have the talent to compose music or poetry, to illustrate or paint, or sculpt or act, or sing or play or conduct.

What do I think He would think? I think He would rejoice at the playing of militant martial music as men marched to defend a righteous cause. I think that He would think there are times when illustrations should be vigorous, with bold and exciting colors. I think He would chuckle with approval when at times of recreation the music is comical or melodramatic or exciting. Or at times when a carnival air is in order that decorations be bright and flashy, even garish.

I think at times of entertainment He would think it quite in order for poetry that would make one laugh or cry—perhaps both at once. I think that He would think it would be in righteous order on many occasions to perform with great dignity symphonies and operas and ballets. I think that He would think that soloists

should develop an extensive repertoire, each number to be performed at a time and in a place that is appropriate.

I would think that He would think there is a place for artwork of every kind—from the scribbled cartoon to the masterpiece in the hand-carved, gold-leaf frame.

But I am sure He would be offended at immodesty and irreverence in music, in art, in poetry, in writing, in sculpture, in dance, or in drama. I know what He would think about music or art or literature or poetry that is purely secular being introduced into our worship services. And how do I know that? Because He has told His servants that. In what ways has He told them? He has told them by either withholding or, on occasions, withdrawing His Spirit when it is done.

I mentioned earlier that I have sometimes struggled without much success to teach sacred things when preceded by music that is secular or uninspired. Let me mention the other side of it.

I have been in places where I felt insecure and unprepared. I have yearned inwardly in great agony for some power to pave the way or loosen my tongue, that an opportunity would not be lost because of my weakness and inadequacy. On more than a few occasions my prayers have been answered by the power of inspired music. I have been lifted above myself and beyond myself when the Spirit of the Lord has poured in upon the meeting, drawn there by beautiful, appropriate music. I stand indebted to the gifted among us who have that unusual sense of spiritual propriety.

Go to, then, you who are gifted; cultivate your gift. Develop it in any of the arts and in every worthy example of them. If you have the ability and the desire, seek a career or employ your talent as an avocation or cultivate it as a hobby. But in all ways bless others with it. Set a standard of excellence. Employ it in the secular sense to every worthy advantage, but never use it profanely. Never express your gift

unworthily. Increase our spiritual heritage in music, in art, in literature, in dance, in drama.

When we have done it, our activities will be a standard to the world. And our worship and devotion will remain as unique from the world as the Church is different from the world. Let the use of your gift be an expression of your devotion to Him who has given it to you. We who do not share in it will set a high standard of expectation: “For of him unto whom much is given much is required” (D&C 82:3).

Now, in conclusion, may I remind you what I said at the beginning. My credential to speak does not come from personal mastery of the arts. I repeat my confession. I am not gifted as a musician or as a poet, nor adequate as an artist, nor accomplished in the field of dance, or writing, or drama. I speak on this subject because I have a calling, one that not only permits, but even requires, that we stay close to Him and to His Spirit.

If we know nothing of the arts, we know something of the Spirit. We know that it can be drawn upon meagerly or almost to the consuming of an individual.

In 1832 the Prophet Joseph Smith received a revelation that now stands as section 88 of the Doctrine and Covenants and was designated by the Prophet as “The Olive Leaf.” I quote a few verses:

Draw near unto me and I will draw near unto you; seek me diligently and ye shall find me; ask, and ye shall receive; knock, and it shall be opened unto you.

Whatsoever ye ask the Father in my name it shall be given unto you, that is expedient for you;

And if ye ask anything that is not expedient for you, it shall turn unto your condemnation.

Behold, that which you hear is as the voice of one crying in the wilderness—in the wilderness, because you cannot see him—my voice, because my voice is Spirit; my Spirit is truth; truth abideth and hath no end; and if it be in you it shall abound.

And if your eye be single to my glory, your whole bodies shall be filled with light, and there shall be no darkness in you; and that body which is filled with light comprehendeth all things.

Therefore, sanctify yourselves that your minds become single to God, and the days will come that you shall see him; for he will unveil his face unto you, and it shall be in his own time, and in his own way, and according to his own will. [D&C 88:63–68]

The Spirit of the Lord can be present on His terms only. God grant that we may learn, each

of us, particularly those who are gifted, how to extend that invitation.

He lives. Of Him I bear witness. Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, the Only Begotten of the Father. Spencer W. Kimball is a prophet of God. We have on our shoulders in this generation the Church and kingdom of God to bear away. God grant that those among us who are the most gifted will devote themselves in order that our task may be easier, I pray, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.