

The Necessity of Penance

Every Sin Demands Atonement

“What am I to do, child of my heart, when my children turn from me? The false peace of this world lures them and in the end will destroy them. They think they have done enough in consecrating themselves to my Immaculate Heart. It is not enough. That which I ask for and is most important many have not given me. What I ask, have asked, and will continue to ask is reformation of life. There must be sanctification from within. I will work my miracles of grace only in those who ask for them and empty their souls of the love and attachment to sin and all that is displeasing to my Son. Souls who cling to sin cannot have their hands free to receive the treasures of grace that I hold out to them.” This is what Our Lady means when she speaks of reformation, renewal. It is this about which she is so concerned, namely, sanctification from within.

“Reform of life is what I ask as the sign and proof of my children’s love for me. God looks at the heart, and if it resembles the Heart of His Divine Son, it is with the greatest pleasure He regards it. But to make your hearts grow more and more like to the Heart of the Son, you must go to the Mother, whose heart is most like His.”

“My sweet child, unless my children reform their lives, they will suffer great persecution. If man himself will not take upon himself the penance necessary to atone for his sins and those of others, God in His justice will have to send upon him the punishment necessary to atone for his transgressions.”

(Sister Mildred Mary Neuzil, *The Diary, OUR LADY OF AMERICA*®, Fostoria, Ohio, Pgs. 18, 16, 17)

Doing penance is a necessary step in obtaining the forgiveness of one’s sins. In chastising the soul and curbing the bodily appetites, one is humbled before God and is disposed toward prayer and understands more intimately the things which are divine and are ordered toward salvation and the encounter with God. God demanded such penance, Christ taught it, and the Church, the Mystical Christ, continues to teach it. This Lenten season of 40 days is a special call to penitence, a call to enter into the desert for purification so we can discern whose voice we listen to: the voice of self and the concupiscence of the flesh, the lies of Satan, or the seductions of our temporal world which, by its nature, stands in opposition to spiritual and eternal things. With the purification of the desert, we are enabled by the Spirit to ascend the mountain of grace where God’s voice can be heard, wooing us like a Lover to His beloved to come live with Him in the infinity of the Father’s Love. Both the Old and the New Testaments tell us that God does not will to reveal Himself to us without first calling us to prayer and penance, to purification, for nothing impure can enter into His Presence. In the desert Moses refused to give the Hebrews the tablets of the Law until they had expiated their sin of idolatry and ingratitude. He himself spent 40 days on the mountain in atonement for their sins. When God sent Jonah to the people of Nineveh to announce: “**Forty days more and Nineveh shall be destroyed!**” the people heeded his message, put on the sackcloth and ashes of humility and repentance and were then spared the *cup of God’s judgment*. Jeremiah’s call to Jerusalem and the kings and nations surrounding it to turn away from sin and back towards God was not heeded. Thus, God commanded Jeremiah to deliver *the cup of His wrath* to them,

foretelling the destruction of Jerusalem and the Babylonian captivity. His message, however, also held **a cup of blessing**, a promise that God, after 70 years of exile, would bring a faithful remnant back to Jerusalem to rebuild the city. The Old Testament is an ongoing story of God's Covenant with His people, His blessing to them and their rebellion against Him, the call to repentance and the threat of His judgment or promise of His blessing in accord with the Covenant and their obedience or refusal to heed the voices of the prophets He sent to save them from self destruction.

In paragraph 7 of his July 1, 1962 encyclical ***Paenitentiam agere***, St. John XXIII states the need for both ***internal and external penance***, quoting the Prophet Joel.

The most deeply impressive of these prophetic utterances is surely that warning of Joel which is constantly ringing in our ears in the course of the Lenten liturgy: "Now therefore, says the Lord, Be converted to me with all your heart, in fasting and in weeping and in mourning. And rend your hearts and not your garments. . . Between the porch and the altar the priests, the Lord's ministers, shall weep and say: Spare, O Lord, spare thy people, and give not thy inheritance to reproach, that the heathen should rule over them."

The Old Testament leads into the New with John the Baptist preaching a baptism of repentance with water. **"Do penance, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."** (Mt 3:2) Jesus, too, before revealing the mysteries of faith to His disciples, preached repentance and conversion and undertook a 40 day fast Himself, like Moses, to atone for the sins of the people. He demanded a complete change of heart and submission to the laws of the Supreme God: **"For behold, the kingdom of God is within you."** (Lk 17:21) When the Apostles were baptized with the Holy Spirit, they preached: **"Do penance and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, for the remission of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."** (Acts 2:38) Constantly we are called by the Spirit to confront our sinfulness. If we have stained the white robe of our sacred Baptism, we are exhorted to wash it clean in the blood of Jesus, the Sacrificial Lamb, who offers us ***the cup of His Blood, the cup of salvation***.

As proclaimed in the passage from the prophet Joel, ***internal penance, a hatred for sin and a determination to make amends for our sins, must come first***, and the Sacrament of Reconciliation is the best way to achieve that rending of the heart. But that change of heart will not last if it is not reinforced with ***external penance*** as well in order to keep our bodies under strict control of reason and faith. Since we are social beings, our sins have a social dimension. **Our penitence, then, must not only be personal but social** as well. We are our brother's keeper. St. Paul tells us: **"They who belong to Christ have crucified their flesh with its passions and desires."** (Gal 5:24) St. Augustine states: **"It is not enough for a man to change his ways for the better and to give up the practice of evil, unless by painful penance, sorrowing humility, the sacrifice of a contrite heart and the giving of alms he makes amends to God for all that he has done wrong."** (Serm. 351)

External penance under the direction of inner conversion includes ***accepting as the will of God the duties of our state in life and the burdens everyday life imposes upon us***. These, however, are not enough; we must likewise make ***voluntary acts of penance***, offering them to God in atonement for our own sins and for the sins of others in our families, our churches, and in the whole of mankind, building up the body of Christ, in imitation of Him. The saints have modeled voluntary penance for us, both in its personal and in its

social dimensions, but none can model the social dimension of atonement, that suffering for the sins of the community, as did Jesus Himself and His most holy Mother. Sinless as they were and without need of any atonement, they embraced God's will and a lifetime of tribulations, fasting, and a terrible Passion unique to themselves, to atone for the sins of mankind. That atonement for us, however, does not excuse us, born in sin with the effects of original sin and scarred with personal sin, from the need for our own personal atonement, achieved through prayer, fasting, and almsgiving, both monetarily and in the form of the spiritual and corporal works of mercy. That atonement from Jesus as our Redeemer and from His Mother as Co-redeemer with Him obliges us to imitate them in making atonement for the sins of others also, especially those dear to us in the family of faith and those who would otherwise be lost because of their lack of faith. Let us heed the words of our Redeemer: **"If anyone wishes to come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me."** (Mt 16:24) We are baptized into Christ's death so we may be transformed in the glory of His Resurrection. (Reference: St. John XXIII, *PAENITENTIAM AGERE*.)

Therefore the Church -- while it reaffirms the primacy of the religious and supernatural values of penitence (values extremely suitable for restoring to the world today a sense of the presence of God and of His sovereignty over man and a sense of Christ and His salvation) -- invites everyone to accompany the inner conversion of the spirit with the voluntary exercise of external acts of penitence.

(Pope Paul VI, *PAENITEMINI, APOSTOLIC CONSTITUTION ON PENANCE*, February 19, 1966, Chapter III.)

In his December 20, 1759 encyclical *APPETENTE SACRO - ON THE SPIRITUAL ADVANTAGES OF FASTING*, Pope Clement XIII spoke of *the holy law of fasting* testified to by the law and the prophets, consecrated by Christ and handed on by the apostles and preserved by the Church, calling us to mortification of the flesh and humiliation of the spirit in order to prepare us to enter ever more deeply into the Paschal Mystery.

...penance for the Christian man is not satisfied by withdrawing from sin, by detesting a past life badly lived, or by the sacramental confession of these same sins. Rather, penance also demands that we satisfy divine justice with fasting, almsgiving, prayer, and other works of the spiritual life. Every wrongdoing -- be it large or small -- is fittingly punished, either by the penitent or by a vengeful God. Therefore we cannot avoid God's punishment in any other way than by punishing ourselves. If this teaching is constantly implanted in the minds of the faithful, and if they drink deeply of it, there will be very little cause to fear that those who have discarded their degraded habits and washed their sins clean through sacramental confession would not want to expiate the same sins through fasting, to eliminate the concupiscence of the flesh. (Paragraph 3)

Mindful of the prophetic voices of the past that called God's people to constant conversion, both as individuals and as nations, and understanding that the Mother of Jesus, His Co-adjutrix in the work of our salvation, is the most profound prophetic voice in modern times, let us heed her warnings to our sinful world, especially to her children in America who honor her as the Immaculate Conception, **Our Lady of America, the Immaculate Virgin.**® Evil is enveloping the world and is now particularly focused on America, both from within and without. Let us ponder Our Lady's words every day of Lent and respond with a tearing

out of sin from the flesh of our hearts and from the soul of America, and let us plead the blood of Jesus, the sacrificial Paschal Lamb, on every person and every nation.

“My beloved daughter, what I am about to tell you concerns in a particular way my children in America. Unless they do penance by mortification and self-denial and thus reform their lives, God will visit them with punishments hitherto unknown to them.”

“My child, there will be peace, as has been promised, but not until my children are purified and cleansed from defilement, and clothed thus with the white garment of grace, are made ready to receive this peace, so long promised and so long held back because of the sins of men.”

“My dear children, either you will do as I desire and reform your lives, or God Himself will need to cleanse you in the fires of untold punishment. You must be prepared to receive His great gift of peace. If you will not prepare yourselves, God will Himself be forced to do so in His justice and mercy.” (Diary, Pg. 21)

“O my child, tell your spiritual father that I come again to warn and to plead. Oh, penance, penance! How little my children understand it! They give me many words, but sacrifice themselves they will not. It is not me they love but themselves. Oh, what blindness, sweet child, what blindness! How it pierces my heart!”

“See, I weep, but my children show me no compassion. They behold the sword in my heart but will make no move to withdraw it. I give them love; they give me only ingratitude. Weep, then, dear child, weep with your Mother over the sins of men. Intercede with me before the throne of mercy, for sin is overwhelming the world and punishment is not far away.” (Diary, Pg. 34)

The following has been called a **“miracle prayer,”** for when we reach the point where we truly mean every word with true **inner conversion**, a miracle of grace will occur.

Lord Jesus, I come before You just as I am. I am sorry for my sins. I repent of my sins; please forgive me. In Your name I forgive all others for what they have done to me. I renounce Satan, the evil spirits and all their works. I give You my entire self, Lord Jesus, now and forever. I invite You into my life, Jesus. I accept You as my Lord, God and Savior. Heal me, change me, strengthen me in body, soul and spirit. Come and fill me with Your Holy Spirit. I love you, Lord Jesus. I praise you, Jesus. I thank you, Jesus. I shall follow You every day of my life. Amen. (Author Unknown)

And let us remember, too, our brothers and sisters!

“Weep, then, dear child, weep with your Mother over the sins of men.”

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