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JMJ

U.I.O.G.D.

Ave Maria!

Jesus, Mary, Joseph, we love You, save souls
O God come to our assistance. Jesus, Mary, Joseph please make haste to help us!

+ + + Jesus, Mary, Joseph + + +

Volume two = The Penitent Christian
FIFTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

The Nature of a Purpose of Amendment

“He that was dead sat up, and began to speak.” St. Luke 7: 15.

In the Gospel of today we have controvertible proofs that the dead son of the widow of Naim was really restored to life by our Lord: “He that was dead sat up” and, that no one might think it was a delusion, “he began to speak,” as if to say to the people who were standing round: “See! I can move; I can speak to you; I am restored to life! “Would to God that all sinners whose souls are dead might thus surely recover the life of sanctifying grace in the Sacrament of Penance! Would to God, that the amendment of their lives always proved the truth of their resurrection! But how many are deluded on this point! How many are there of whom, when they come out of the confessional, we might say with truth in the words of the Gospel of today. “Behold, a dead man is carried out!” Dead he went in, and dead he comes out. His repentance is only an apparent one. This occurs either through culpably omitting a grievous sin in the examen of conscience, or through want of a true supernatural sorrow for sin, or else through want of a firm purpose of amendment, which is the third requisite to a good confession. Of the nature of this purpose learn, today, my brethren,

I. That he who desires to possess the life of grace in the Sacrament of Penance must have a firm purpose of avoiding mortal sin; and

II. That he must have a firm purpose of avoiding all mortal sins for all time.

I. True contrition does not consist in mere words, nor in sighs and tears, but in an act of the will by which I hate and detest them all from a supernatural motive, and wish from my heart that I had never committed them. The purpose of amendment that I make in presence of God and of my confessor does not consist in mere words, but in an earnest and present determination of my will, from a supernatural motive, not to commit again a single mortal sin in any way whatever, for the sake of any person, pleasure, or profit, and to use all the necessary efforts to carry out this determination. If this firm purpose is wanting, repentance is of no avail, confession is useless, and the absolution received is invalid. The Council of Trent says: *True repentance requires not merely a detestation of one’s sins, but also a firm purpose of amending one’s life.*

But, alas! Of the numbers who go to confession, how few there are who make this earnest attempt to amend their lives! “I firmly purpose to avoid all sin, and to amend my life,” such are the words many sinners utter with the mouth; but what do their hearts say? Ask your own conscience. Do you not often

think, when saying those words: “I shall never be able to do as I say I cannot give up this or that”? “I will amend,” says the mouth. “But,” thinks the heart: “I cannot look favorably on that man whom I have long borne hatred to, much less, can I say anything good about him.” “I will amend,” says the mouth. “But,” thinks the heart: “when difficulties arise at home I will not abstain from cursing and swearing.” “I will amend,” says the mouth. “But, next Sunday, as usual,” says the heart: “I will go to the ale-house, and get drunk.” “I will amend,” says the mouth. “But if I happen to be in that person’s company, which is very likely to be the case,” says the heart: “I will not abstain from taking impure liberties.” Has he a firm determination of the will who knows in his conscience that he does not intend keeping his promises of amendment? His purpose consists rather in mere desires, which, like the weather-cock on the steeple, turn round in every direction, according to the wind, but, nevertheless, are not to be moved from their place. Such a sinner would like to avoid sin, but at the same time to gratify his wicked passions. He would like to love God above all things, with his whole heart, and at the same time to place no restraint on his love for creatures. He would like to enter on the way to heaven, and still to keep on the broad path that leads to hell. “The sluggard willeth, and willeth not” (Prov. 13:4), says the Wise Man. It is not enough to say: “I would like to do it.” You must say, “I *will* do it; I am in earnest about it; I will make use of the proper means,” It is useless for the merchant to sit idle in his shop, saying : “I would like to be rich!” or in the soldier to run away from the fight, saying : “I would like to gain the victory” ; or for the student to shut up his books and waste his time, saying : “I would like to be at the head of my class!” All this “would like” is not of the least help to them. The merchant must labor, the soldier must fight and the student must study earnestly, if they wish to succeed. Hell is filled with such fruitless wishes and desires, which, if they were capable of restoring a sinner to the state of grace, would soon convert the abode of death into the mansion of life, and the prison of the damned into a paradise of joys. Sinner, are you in earnest about being converted and doing penance? Then you must say from your heart, with the penitent David “I said: Now have I begun” (Ps. 56: 11); I am fully determined to avoid all sin, and to amend my life. Now I have begun; the change for the better has already commenced. Ah, (you think), if I only could do that! You should rather say: If I only wished to do it. You do not wish to do it, and there the fault lies. We read in the Gospel of St. Luke that the guests who were invited to the feast “began all at once to make excuse.” The first said: “I have bought a farm, and must needs go out and see it.” Another said “I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to try them;” but the third made it appear an utter impossibility for him to go: “I have married a wife, and therefore, I cannot come” (St. Luke 14: 18- 20). But St. Matthew, who relates the same parable in a different manner, gives, in a few words, the true cause of their remaining away, and shows that their excuses were worthless : “*They would not come*” (St. Matthew 22 : 3), he says. Thus he gives us to understand, that the excuses we allege for not amending our lives, and which are founded on our weakness, or evil inclinations, or on temptations, habits, and necessity, are referred by the all-seeing God to the one chief cause, “they would not come.” They do not amend, because they do not wish to amend. They do not abstain from cursing, drunkenness, hatred, injustice, and impurity, because they do not wish to abstain. In a word, the earnest purpose is wanting to them. Ah, what can we not do to secure some temporal gain, to prevent some outlay of money, because we are in earnest about it! How readily we overcome ourselves, and what difficulties we are ready to face! If sinners would only give a penny to some poor person whenever they curse or swear, or send some money to a charitable institution when they fall into their accustomed sins, I am sure that in a short time they would find a great change for the better; and they would have to acknowledge, that they were unable to amend hitherto because they had no wish to amend, and that, as they were wanting in this firm purpose, their confessions were invalid.

Others who flatter themselves that they have a firm purpose of amendment while, in reality, they are always running from one confessor to another, looking for a priest who never gives them a word of advice; who knows not the state of their conscience; who is ignorant of the length of time they have been subject to their bad habits, and who, not being aware that they are in the proximate occasion of sin, cannot remind them of their duty in that respect. Again; the same grievous sins of which you now accuse your-

self, you have often confessed before; and you have been confessing them for the last six, seven, or eight months, or even for the last two or three years, or longer. After all that time, you are just as much addicted to vice as before. How is it possible; how can any sensible man imagine, that you ever had a sincere purpose of amendment, since there is not the least sign of any improvement in you? If a man is really resolved to avoid a certain thing, he can easily find means to carry out his intention. If you are determined not to fall into the mud, you know how to avoid the stone over which you stumbled before. The proverb says: "Even the stupid ass does not stumble twice over the same stone." If, once or twice you scald a dog that you wish to drive out of your kitchen, you will find that he will not come back again. But you return for the third, sixth, or twentieth time, with the same sins on your conscience, after having fallen over the same stone, or been scalded with the same water. Who can believe that your purpose of amendment was anything more than empty words, to which you did not attach the least meaning? "He is a scoffer, and not a penitent," says St. Augustine, "who still does what he repents of."

St. John Chrysostom calls such repentance, "theatrical penitence," because it is like a stage-scene in a comedy. Have you not sometimes seen a fight represented on the stage? The combatants rush at each other with drawn swords and with every appearance of rage and fury; at last, one of them falls to the ground, stretches out his hands, and seems quite lifeless. A child, who does not understand what is going on, begins to cry at seeing the man fall dead; but his father, who is sitting beside him, easily reassures him, and explains to him that it was only a sham fight, and that the man will soon come to life again. Later on, the same man who pretended to be dead comes on the stage again in a different character. "See," the father says to his child, "there is the man! Do you not recognize him? When the play is over, the pretended dead man goes home and eats, and drinks, and amuses himself with his family just as before." Like this is the apparent repentance of many who go to confession. They throw themselves down on their knees, praying, sighing, and striking their breasts, and saying to themselves: "I am heartily sorry for having offended God, and I will never sin again!" So much they say with their lips, and then they go to the priest and receive absolution. Those who cannot see the heart would say of such: "Surely, there is now an end of sin! Here is every sign of true sorrow!" But alas, God thinks differently. The consciences of those people are still burdened with sin as before. How do we know that? Have a little patience and in a short time you will see the apparent penitent returning to his former evil ways; a sure sign that he has not had an earnest purpose of amendment; for where there is no amendment, there has been only a useless repentance.

I do not mean to say that it is always an infallible sign of an inefficacious purpose for one to relapse into the same sins. Past sins, (even grievous ones), may be committed again, after some time, or under the pressure of a great temptation or occasion. Our wills, alas, are inconstant and changeable, so that today we may be honestly determined to do the will of God, and tomorrow, quite differently disposed. What I say holds good chiefly of those who spend months and years in the same vices, showing no sign of amendment from one confession to another, and making no use of the proper means to correct their bad habits. Of such people I say that they have not a firm purpose of amendment, no matter what they say to the contrary in confession, for their actions contradict their words. Hence, *there must be an earnest determination to avoid all sin.*

II. There must be a firm purpose to avoid all sin *for all time and under all circumstances.* God accepts no temporary armistice; if you wish to be reconciled to him, you must declare with him a peace which is to last forever. You must be resolved at the present moment never again to commit a single mortal sin, under any circumstances whatever. At the present moment, I say; for your purpose (no matter how strong it may be), cannot keep you from sinning in the future; but your will must be so disposed that you are firmly determined as long as your good purpose lasts, that mortal sin shall be incompatible with it; and if it lasted for eternity, it would be impossible for you ever to commit a mortal sin. God wishes to make a lasting peace with you; he will not be satisfied with half of your heart. In virtue of your purpose, you must be firmly resolved to avoid all the proximate occasions of sin, to overcome all bad desires and

inclinations, and to fulfill all the obligations that arise from sin. If you have not a firm resolution to that effect, your purpose is of no use, and your confession is invalid.

There are many who purpose to avoid sinful acts, yet retain their evil desires and inclinations. As a sick man, who abstains from certain articles of food and drink, solely because the physician obliges him to do so, meanwhile, eagerly desires the forbidden meats; so, would-be penitents often hunger after their past excesses and rejoice secretly in the recollection of past forbidden pleasures which they have only abandoned perforce. They wish they had made more use of the opportunities formerly offered them of indulging their passions; they regard as happy those who still gratify themselves in that way. They wish that it were not forbidden, but lawful, to indulge in such pleasures; and they are so disposed, that, if there were no hell, they would sin without scruple. They do not fear sin, nor offending God, but solely hell-fire. This being a mere slavish fear, which does not fully exclude the will to commit sin, therefore, does not suffice for a true conversion. Nay, to be thus disposed, to say, for instance, if impurity were not forbidden under pain of hell, I would commit it, is a new mortal sin; because it is a purpose of offending God if there were no hell, as well as a real complacency in and desire for the sinful action. O sinner, how can you thus treat your good God? You give him your heart as you would give your money to a cut-throat who threatens your life. "Here," you say, "take all my money, but spare my life!" while you think in your heart that, if he had not a dagger pointed at your throat, you would be very far from parting with your purse so easily. "Here," you say to God, "here is my will and the assurance of my obedience; I must obey thee and abandon sin; but if had not hell to fear, if I could live forever, then I know what I should do!" Away with such purposes of amendment! They are of no avail to the forgiveness of sin!

They do not completely abandon sin who do not give up the proximate occasions and results of sin: I mean, those ill-gotten gains, those improper intimacies, all those things which have been a scandal and a frequent cause of sin to themselves and others. Some men, not satisfied with the sins they commit themselves, leave, as it were, an inheritance of sin to their descendants. So, an unchaste man, who cannot any longer gratify his passions, dies; but he leaves behind him bad books, lewd pictures, and statues enough to corrupt the living. A vindictive man dies; but he leaves behind him a legacy of hatred stamped in the memories of his children, by his oft repeated expressions of rancor against his enemy. An avaricious man dies; but he leaves to his heirs a load of unjust and usurious gains that is sufficient to damn them. All these people make bad confessions; their sorrow is useless, their purpose vain, the absolution they receive invalid!

What a blessing it would be, what a consolation for the confessor, what a splendid proof of an earnest purpose of amendment, if the penitent could always say with truth: "Father, I am seriously resolved to amend, and, in order to prove my sincerity, here are 'the heads' of my sins. I have wronged my neighbor, but I have made complete restitution. I have the money here that belongs to him. Can you tell me how to restore it without exposing my good name?" or, "I have lived in improper intimacy for so long with a certain person; but that person is now gone away, or, I have left the house in which I used to sin;" or, "For some months past I have not spoken a word to one whom I disliked, but we are now reconciled." Oh, what a splendid proof of a sincere resolution to amend! But, alas, that proof is not always at hand! Alas! in that Day of Wrath when the "Written Book shall be produced;" when that great account-book shall be opened, out of which the thoughts, words, and actions of all men shall be judged—how many confessions and absolutions we shall then find rejected by the Judge, although, in the opinion of men, they were valid! Then, we shall see the truth of the words, "Many are called, but few chosen" (St. Matthew 20: 16), even amongst those who were judged to be repentant sinners.

"Pour out thy heart like water before the face of the Lord" (Lam. 2: 19), is again my conclusion. O sinner, if you wish to be truly converted to God, pour out your heart like water, not like oil, so that no grievous sin may remain in it. Pour out your heart like water, not like money out of a purse. And why? If you let your money fall, you can stoop down, and pick it up; but if you pour out water on the ground, it is absorbed by the earth, and you can never recover it. In making your purpose of amendment, pour out with

your sins, all the will, desire, or hope of returning to them again, crying out with St. Paul: “For I am sure that neither death nor life nor any other creature shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord!” (Rom. 8: 38, 39.) Amen.

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