

V2_6th_after_Epiphany=On The Torment Caused By A Bad Conscience.

Listen to the Mp3 audio file for this sermon by clicking on this link:

http://www.jmjsite.com/media/hunolt_ss_vol2/6sun_epiphany_vol_II.mp3

+

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

SIXTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY.

On The Torment Caused By A Bad Conscience.

“Grace be to you, and peace.” I Thess. 2: 10.

Yes, peace! But there is no peace, where there is a domestic war and torture; whose business it is to torment sinners day and night, namely their bad consciences. O sinners, if you are not sunk in the lowest depths of wickedness, you must know by your own experience what a cruel tormentor a bad conscience is? And are you not foolish, then, to remain in the unhappy state of sin, or to make a deliberate choice of that state by committing sin? For if you fear neither death, nor hell, nor any other punishment, at least the uneasiness and torment of your own consciences should frighten you. And it is a torment which has not its equal on earth, as I shall now show by way of salutary warning to you, and I say:

I. *A bad conscience tortures the soul most keenly, by continually upbraiding her with her sins.*

II. *A bad conscience tortures the soul most keenly by continually threatening her with eternal damnation on account of her sins.*

I. There is no doubt that it causes most exquisite torture to be upbraided with what one is deeply ashamed of, and tries to hide in every possible way. But the torture is still worse when one cannot deny or excuse one's self for that which causes his shame, and when the accuser is a person of high authority, against whom no defense is possible, so that the only thing to do is to hang one's head in utter confusion. But the worst of all is, when the upbraiding is kept up for a long time, with bitter words and sarcastic laughter, and that under such circumstances the person upbraided is compelled to stand by and listen; this, I say, is so great a torture, that any honorable man would prefer to be beaten black and blue, rather than undergo it. Is it not so, my dear brethren? Some one says in company (and generally speaking, slanderous and uncharitable remarks about the faults of others form the staple of conversation): I know a certain person in town, whose name I will not mention, although he is well enough known, who has made a good deal of money in a rather unjust manner.

What a shame for him! The man has no conscience, etc. I know one who is very frequent in his visits to such and such a person; it is easy to guess what he is after; he is a source of scandal to the whole neighborhood, etc. Now if, during a conversation of this kind, any one happens to be present who is addicted to any of those vices, and thinks that the remarks are intended for himself, how ashamed he must feel! He gets red and pale alternately, and wishes he were a hundred miles away from the place, although the person speaking may not even have thought of him. How much greater would not his shame and confusion be, if the uncharitable remarks were pointedly directed at him!

Imagine the state of Aman at the banquet given by Queen Esther to Assuerus. When they had eaten and drunk enough, Esther, at the king's command, made her request: "Give me my life for which I ask, and my people, for which I request;" for I and my people are to be slain. And, what is still worse, our enemy is in such a position that, acting as he does in the king's name, his cruelty will be ascribed to the king. Consider now, my dear brethren, what must have been the state of Aman's mind on hearing himself accused so unexpectedly. The king, wroth at what he heard, asked: "Who is this, and of what power, that he should do these things?" The question was like a thunderbolt to Aman. But Esther answered: "It is this Aman that is our adversary and most wicked enemy." How great must have been the confusion of Aman at hearing this answer! "Aman," says the Scripture, "hearing this, was forthwith astonished, not being able to bear the countenance of the king and of the queen." Full of fear and shame and hardly conscious of what he was doing, he threw himself before Esther's couch, and would, no doubt, have rejoiced if he could have died on the spot. So intolerable is the torment caused by being upbraided with one's own shame (Esther 7: 5, 6).

Nearly every day, O sinner, you have to bear a similar torment, after having mortally offended your God, unless, indeed, you are one of those who are sunk in the very depths of depravity, and have become callous and obdurate. If you are not gone so far as that, then you will have torture and punishment enough to bear.

You have within you, in your bad conscience, a devil that is by no means dumb; or, to speak better, your conscience is the devil that tortures you, by continually reproaching you with your shame in the bitterest terms; nor can you hear those reproaches without heartfelt anguish and confusion; and yet you are compelled to listen to them against your will. The moment you satisfy your brutal lusts, or your inordinate inclinations, and commit a sin, the tormenting demon is, as you must acknowledge, already there, and he calls out to you, as Pilate did to Christ, "what hast thou done?" Miserable mortal, where are you going to? Whither have your blind desires led you? Shame upon you! If any honorable man knew what you have done, you would be covered with confusion! And yet the Almighty God has seen you while you were actually insulting him, and trampling under foot his precious Blood. Is that your gratitude to him for the countless gifts and graces he has bestowed on you? And what better are you now for what you have done, poor wretch that you are? And what has become of your soul? It is sold to the devil for a vile and momentary pleasure, for a worthless thing! How dare you lift up your eyes to heaven any more? What has become of the merits of your former good works? You have lost them all in a moment. Where are

now your so oft-repeated protestations that you would rather die than offend God by mortal sin? How the devil must laugh at you, now that he has so easily ensnared you! Where is now your devotion to, your confidence in, the Mother of God? How can you dare to call her your Mother, after having so wickedly driven her most beloved Son out of your heart? Such are the bitter reproaches of your conscience when you have committed a sin. And that is according to what God said to Cain: "If thou do well, shalt thou not receive? But if ill, shall not sin forthwith be present at the door?"

And what have you to say by way of defense? You cannot deny what you are accused of; your conscience brings it clearly before you; whether you will or not, you must acknowledge your guilt. In vain do you try to cloak your wickedness, or to allege false excuses for your sin. You may deceive men by them, but not yourself, your conscience speaks out plainly and distinctly; it cannot be deceived by flattery; and therefore you must hear it in silence, and bear your shame as best you can. You think perhaps, my sin was committed in secret, no one knows anything of it but myself and my associate in guilt, and I am certain that it will never be revealed, so that I can appear before men just as good as I was before, and they will have the same good opinion of me. True it is that, when you do wrong, you do not call in witnesses; and impurity, theft, and other shameful crimes are committed in the darkness of the night, and in hidden holes and corners, and are concealed from the eyes of men by a hypocritical appearance of piety; but tell me, "If you have no other witness of your sin, have you not the testimony of your own conscience?" If no man knows of your guilt, it is known, at all events, to God and to yourself, and that is enough to cause you to be tortured by the pangs of remorse. If men, angels, demons, nay, even God himself, were to leave you in peace, you have within you a torturer whose bitter reproaches you must bear to your great confusion; and it is in that especially that the torment of a bad conscience consists, namely, that it annoys and troubles you alone and in secret.

Nay, the fact that you dare not make known your trouble to others, rather increases, than lessens it. Every one who is afflicted seeks consolation from his friends and acquaintances, and relates to them in detail all that he has to suffer, and he is able to bear his trials far more courageously when he is aware that others sympathize with him. The bitterest trial of all is the secret of which one dares not complain, and which he must bear alone and unsupported. Thus it often happens that a man appears outwardly with a smiling countenance, while in the depths of his heart he is consumed with anguish. And so it is in reality with the sinner who is tortured by a bad conscience. Shame prevents him from making known his sufferings to any one. That others have a good opinion of him, instead of lessening, rather increases his torment; for his conscience continually cries out to him: See, men look upon you as good and pious, and you are in reality a slave of the devil! What must God think of you?

And how are you to get rid of those importunate upbraidings? Will you run away from them? But whither can you go? No matter where you are, or what you do, you have your conscience, that is your tormenting demon, always with you. Nor can you induce it to be still; for conscience is, so to speak, without shame; it cannot be persuaded by flattery, or

bribed by gifts; it is insensible to kind, as well as to harsh words, and it persists in doing the office entrusted to it by God, namely, exhorting and tormenting the sinner. It is a thorn in his side, which causes acute pain, that no ointment, or medicine can allay until the thorn is pulled out. In vain do you keep away from sermons, lest you should hear some allusion to your secret vices; and it generally is the case that they who have a bad conscience are very negligent in hearing the word of God, especially when they have reason to suspect that the truth will be told them; but I say, it is no use for you to try to save yourself in that way, for at home, in your own room, you have a preacher who tells you the truth about your sins better than any one else, and that preacher is your own conscience, which reproaches you with your wickedness all the more bitterly because you try to avoid hearing what it has to say. When the bell rings for the sermon, your conscience says to you, Unhappy man that you are! You have gone so far now, that you dare not hear the word of God, which used to strengthen and comfort you in the divine service. In fact, do what you will, you cannot avoid the pangs of remorse, and at last you will be obliged, if you wish to get any rest at all, to make known your shame and your sin.

How many plans the sinner resorts to, in order to free himself from the heavy and loathsome burden of his own conscience! But all to no purpose. He goes into company in order to divert his mind from its troubles; he tries to steal away the time, as it were, from his cares and to conceal his anguish from the eyes of men by all kinds of amusements, feasting, and dancing; but in vain midst of his pleasures his smiling countenance, his outward gayety, are only a cloak to hide the trouble and uneasiness that are gnawing at his heart, which is groaning and sighing under a heavy burden. Sometimes the sinner thinks that he will silence the voice of conscience, and get rid of his trouble by putting off his confession for months and years, or, what is still worse, by concealing in confession the shameful sin that causes him remorse but he only makes matters worse; for the burden becomes heavier on account of the additional guilt of sacrilege. He then tries another plan, and imagines that outward acts of devotion, or long prayers, or almsgiving will quiet his uneasy conscience; but here too he is mistaken, and his remorse is only increased, for he is continually reminded that his prayers and devotions are not sincere, since he has not honestly made his peace with God. No matter what efforts he may make otherwise to find peace, he will at last be forced to disclose his own shame, to make known his sins in confession, and penitently and humbly to beg pardon for it. If he refuses to do that, he will never be freed from his torments.

How painful it must be for a soul to be thus perpetually tortured! According to the wise man, "It is better to dwell in a wilderness, than with a quarrelsome and passionate woman;" and I can easily imagine that such is the case; but is it not a still more unbearable torment to have to dwell with a bad conscience, that is always reproaching you? O sinner! are you not really mad and out of your senses to expose yourself to such lasting and intolerable torture, and to forfeit the grace and friendship of God for the sake of some momentary pleasure, or trifling gain, or short-lived gratification of your evil desires? O man, who know very well how sin plagues and torments you and gnaws at your heart, how can you so readily and even laughingly swallow down the forbidden morsel that you know

will cause you such suffering, for the sake of a momentary pleasure? Whom have you to blame but yourself? And, indeed, according to the philosopher Seneca, you richly deserve the punishment you have brought on yourself. "The first and greatest punishment of the sinner is sin, nor does any crime go unpunished, for every crime is its own punishment," since it is always reproaching the sinner. But the torment of a bad conscience does not end here, for, besides its bitter upbraiding, it threatens the sinner with eternal damnation as his final destiny."

II. While a prisoner is being tried and his case still under examination, he is full of anxiety as to how it will end ; but if the judge passes sentence of death on him, his fear and terror know no bounds, as all those who have to prepare such prisoners for death know by experience. No matter how resigned they may have been before to the will of God, so that one might think that there would not be the least trouble in preparing them for death, when the fatal sentence is announced to them, they change at once, and give way to extreme anguish and despair. They brood over their fate, and neither know what they are saying themselves, nor understand what is said to them, and if their terror allows them to sleep, they dream of nothing but the sword, the wheel, or the gallows that is to deprive them of life.

See, O sinner, how it is with you, when you have within you the tormenting demon of a bad conscience. It not only reproaches you with your shame, but also reminds you that sentence of death, and of eternal death, too, has been passed on you. You are lost! it says; you have deserved death! As long as you are in this state, you are doomed to destruction! Sentence is passed on you already; away to hell, to eternal fire! When you hear the roar of the thunder and see the flash of the lightning, you are filled with anguish by the voice of conscience, which cries out to you, take care, an angry God is about to take vengeance on you! A thunder-bolt will fall on you; the lightning will strike you! Will you not now at least remember that there is an all-powerful God, whom you must fear, and whom you have hitherto so grossly insulted? If a pestilence attacks the city, and hurries off numbers of the people to their graves, your conscience fills you with terror. Alas! it says, what will become of you? Death is at your very door! Do you think you can escape the calamity from which so many good and pious people have suffered? It is you and such as you who have been the cause of this calamity, and what would become of you if you were now to fall sick and die?

If you happen to hear of an accident, for instance, that poor man who was in perfect health when he went to bed last night, was found dead this morning; or, another man died in a quarter of an hour from a fit of apoplexy; or, that woman fell down and broke her neck; all these things are apt to fill you with mortal terror. Ah, your conscience says to you, you deserve that fate better than that man or that woman! Who knows what may happen to you this very day? If you chance, even against your will, to be present at a sermon which treats of death or hell, or the judgment of God, you are terror-stricken; every word you hear seems to confirm the sentence of your eternal damnation. If your secret vice is even faintly alluded to, your conscience is at once on the alert; that is meant for me, you think; what business has the preacher to speak so pointedly at me? If you remain away

from the sermon, your conscience is alarmed at the sound of the bell which gives the signal for it; there, it says, you have a clear proof of your eternal reprobation, since you avoid the word of God, which could bring you to repentance.

Yes, says St. Crysostom, he who is plagued by a bad conscience often imagines that even lifeless creatures, the stones, the wall, and the shadows on it are so many voices that pronounce sentence on him; he is like a poor prisoner who, when he hears the least noise at his cell door, imagines that he is to be led forth at once to execution, although the noise may be merely the howling of the wind. The Holy Scripture gives us a striking proof of this in the wicked King Bahassar. Baltassar was seated at table surrounded by the nobles of his kingdom, when, in the midst of his revelry, he suddenly grew pale: and he cried out in dread, so that all who heard him were alarmed. And what was the matter? What had frightened him? "There appeared fingers, as it were of the hand of a man, writing over against the candlestick upon the surface of the wall of the king's palace; and the king beheld the joints of the hand that wrote." And what did it write? Three little words, that the king did not even understand. What reason had he then for giving way to such excessive terror? It was not the hand, that frightened him, but his bad conscience, which made him suspect, what was really the case, that the hand was writing on the wall the sentence of death which his conscience had already pronounced on him.

There are countless examples of the same kind: Theodoric, king of Italy, nearly fainted with fright when he saw a fish brought to table, thinking it was the head of Symmachus, whom he had caused to be put to death, that was coming open-mouthed to devour him. When Henry VIII., king of England, was on his death-bed, he thought that those who were standing round were the religious whom he had banished or put to death, and who were coming to summon him before the judgment-seat of God. The emperor Constantius imagined that every shadow he saw was the ghost of his murdered brother, quaffing to him a goblet full of blood. Persus destroyed all the swallows' nests he could find and killed the birds themselves, because he thought that they were always accusing him of having murdered his father. Thus, "whereas wickedness is fearful it beareth witness of its condemnation." And this is the punishment that God threatens to inflict on sin, as we read in Deuteronomy: 'If thou wilt not hear the voice of the Lord thy God, to keep and to do all his Commandments. . . . the Lord will give thee a fearful heart, and languishing eyes, and a soul consumed with pensiveness. Thou shalt fear night and day, neither shalt thou trust thy life. In the morning thou shalt say: who will grant me evening? and at evening, who will grant me morning? for the fearfulness of the heart, wherewith thou shalt be terrified.' This is the torment of which St. Paul writes to the Romans, "Tribulation and anguish upon every soul of man that worketh evil." It is the torment of which St. Augustine says that "amongst all the tribulations that can afflict the human soul, there is none greater than a bad conscience." Nay, if you wish to have, while still on earth some idea of the torments of hell, then learn what it is to have a bad conscience. Ask King David how his tortured him; he will tell you: "There is no health in my flesh, because of thy wrath; there is no peace for my bones because of my sins. I am become miserable, and am bowed down even to the end I walked sorrowful all the day long. I am afflicted and humbled exceedingly; I roared

with the groaning of my heart. My sin is always before me." The adultery and murder that I have committed are always before my mind.

Perhaps you may think that, because David had, before he sinned, a good and tender conscience, it is no wonder that he felt the sting of remorse so keenly afterwards? Ask, then, another, who was sunk in the very depths of depravity; Luther, I mean, who cast all honor and shame to the winds, who feared neither God nor man, who bid defiance to spiritual and temporal authority, to princes and potentates; and you will find that even he could not escape the tortures of remorse. Every day he indulged to excess in the pleasures of the table, hoping thereby to silence the reproaches of his conscience, but in vain. Hear his own words on this subject, as they are given by Ulenberg, his biographer: "Because I sometimes appear cheerful, people think I lead a happy life; but God sees what kind of a life I lead." He confessed to his friend Pomeranus that it was impossible to describe the mental anguish he suffered. You may read of people whose hair turned suddenly gray through remorse of conscience. Such was the case with Louis the Severe, whose hair turned gray in a single night through remorse at a murder he was guilty of; so that although he was quite a young man, he looked next morning as if he were seventy years old. You will find examples of people who, to get rid of the tortures of remorse, made away with themselves by hanging themselves to a bed post, or piercing their hearts with a dagger, or cutting their throats, or drowning themselves, etc. Thus they preferred to go straight to hell, rather than bear any longer the torment of a bad conscience. So true is it that "amongst all the tribulations that can afflict the human soul, there is none greater than a bad conscience."

Sinners, to you I address my conclusion in the words of St. Paul to the Romans, "what fruit therefore had you then in those things, of which you are now ashamed?" Tell me, pray, what advantage have you gained by incurring the guilt of sin in the sight of God? What remains to you now of the past and momentary pleasure in which you sought your gratification? What have you gained by concealing that abominable sin in confession? You know now by your own experience, although you may not show it outwardly, what the result of your sin is, and it is nothing else but secret shame, anguish, and remorse of conscience, a hell upon earth. Are you not cruel towards yourselves in thus burdening your minds with such intolerable anguish? Are you not foolish in deferring repentance, when you can at once free yourselves from the miserable state in which you are? But perhaps you think I am exaggerating; perhaps you do not feel this torture so keenly? I know that not every sinner suffers from remorse in the same degree; there are some who suffer more, and others, less; according as their consciences are tender, or hardened; in the same way, too, there are some vices that cause more shame than others; and finally, time lessens remorse to a certain extent; yet there is hardly any one who does not feel it in some degree or other. But if there is any one who, after having committed grievous sin, feels no uneasiness, nor remorse, then, alas! I need say no more to him, for he is evidently hardened in wickedness and abandoned by God and that is the greatest punishment, next to eternal damnation, that can be inflicted on sin. But if you still feel your consciences uneasy, oh, then thank God, and drive away the tormenting demon at once by sincere

repentance and amendment! Do not think the worse of preachers or confessors if they reprove your vices sharply and try to deter you from sin by describing the malice of it. They mean well with you, and their object is either to save you from falling into sin and from thus incurring the tortures of remorse, or to free you from the state of sin, if you are already in it. If there was no other punishment for sin but an uneasy conscience, you should try to avoid all sin. If there was no other reward for a virtuous life, but the peace of mind that a good conscience brings, that alone should be enough to induce you to try to do the holy will of God in all things. Pious Christians! let this be your conclusion: do not allow yourselves to be deceived by the false and merely apparent happiness of sinners; serve your God faithfully, and enjoy in the possession of the highest good that peace which surpasses all worldly joys, and is a foretaste of the eternal joys of heaven. Amen.

Thank you for visiting: <http://www.JMJsit.com>. Please share this information and tell others about this website.