

V2_1st_of_Advent= Penitential Works

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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

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Penitential Works

“Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and impurities, but put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ.” Rom. 13: 13, 14.

Our holy Mother, the Catholic Church, gives us a beautiful and salutary lesson in the words of today’s Epistle, wherewith she instructs all her children how to prepare for the advent of Jesus Christ, our Saviour and future Judge. And what does she say? “It is now the hour for us to rise from sleep.” Sinners, it is full time for you to awaken out of the deep sleep of sin by true penance. “Let us therefore cast off the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light.” But when you have so far done penance that you are freed from the slavery of sin, and have regained the grace of God, what must you do then? “Let us walk honestly as in the day not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and impurities: but put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ,” that is, imitate the example of him who spared not himself in vigils, fasting, and sufferings; and make not provision for the flesh in its concupiscence.” The true Christian must lead a penitential life, mortifying and crucifying his flesh. Why? Because he has sinned and may sin again. And he who has sinned must do penance,

I. *Because he owes it to God and*

II. *Because he owes it to himself*

It is a grievous error of heretics, to condemn all works of penance and satisfaction. Luther and his followers say: True penance consists in the amendment of one's life; there is no need of contrition or works of penance. Christ has already fully atoned for all our sins, by offering to his eternal Father the inexhaustible treasure of his precious Blood, so that we are not required to suffer the least punishment. To mortify and chastise ourselves for our sins is nothing else but to lessen and declare invalid the merits of Jesus Christ. Nay, provided we have but a firm faith in the sufferings and death of Christ, the Son of God, nothing else is needed.

This error has been long since condemned by the Catholic Church, especially in the Council of Trent. All the Fathers and Doctors of the Church are opposed to this error, since they all exhort us, by voice and pen, to do penance. A sinner, says Tertullian in the first Christian century, is one who lives on earth in order to do penance. St. Augustine says that there are three kinds of tribunals, in which God judges in different ways. First, that of his mercy and goodness which is in the Sacrament of Baptism; second, that of his justice, which will be unmitigated in the general judgment; and third, that of both justice and mercy, in the Holy Sacrament of Penance, wherein, in consideration of the infinite merits and satisfaction of Jesus Christ, he forgives the guilt of sin completely and forever, but reserves some temporal punishment which must be suffered by the penitent in atonement for his sins.

This is but right. If I offend a man like myself, and injure him in his property, his honor or his good name, not only must I humbly and contritely acknowledge my sin, beg the man's pardon and promise that I will never offend him again, but I must repair the injury I have done his honor or his property, even at great cost to myself. So with earthly tribunals. If the Governor graciously pardons a malefactor condemned to death, he does not set him free without punishment: his sentence is commuted either to imprisonment for life, or for a term of years. Sinner, your life was spared, when you humbly confessed your sins and received sacramental absolution, so that you ought to be eternally grateful for the benefit bestowed on you. But gratitude is not enough; you must make reparation to the injured honor of God; you must satisfy the divine justice for the punishment that still remains due to your sins, either by bearing patiently the crosses and trials that God sends you, or by voluntary penances and mortifications in this life, or else you will have to suffer long and indescribable pains in purgatory.

Even Adam and Eve saw the justice of this when the first sin was committed. When they tried to cover their nakedness, they made for themselves a garment out of leaves, the leaves of the fig-tree: "They sewed together fig-leaves, and made themselves aprons" (Gen. 3: 7). Why did they choose fig-leaves, which are hard and rough, and are more apt to torment the body than to clothe it? It was precisely because they were rough, that our first parents chose them, in order thereby to show that he who has sinned, and has lost the grace of God, must wear a garment of penance, no matter how it is fashioned. . . and they would have always worn this penitential garment, if God, in his mercy, had not made for them garments of skins, instead of the fig-leaves.

David had sinned grievously, and repented of his sin so thoroughly and with so much contrition, that the prophet Nathan, in the name of the Lord, assured him of forgiveness. “Nevertheless,” he added, “because thou hast given occasion to the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme, for this thing, the child that is born to thee shall surely die” (2 Kings 12: 14). Famine, war, persecution, and other plagues shall come upon thee. Was David satisfied with this penance enjoined on him by the prophet, after his confession? “I am ready for scourges,” he sighs, “and my sorrow is continually before me” (Ps. 37: 18). His fasting was so severe that ashes were his food, and tears of contrition his drink. “I did eat ashes like bread, and mingled my drink with weeping” (Ps. 101: 10).

Sinful Christian, you too, have offended the great God; you have often and grievously during your life transgressed his commandments. Where is your penance for those sins? I have performed the penance enjoined on me by the priest. Ah? And what sort of a penance was it? I have said a few decades of the Rosary, or some of the penitential psalms, or I have heard a Mass, or given a trifling alms to the poor, or have abstained from meat for one evening. Nothing more than that? Where are the voluntary mortifications and penances that should justly follow the performance of the slight penance enjoined on you? I know nothing about them; my confessor said nothing of them to me. Is that a sufficient reason for doing nothing more? The penance that, for good reasons and according to the merciful disposition of the Catholic Church, is now enjoined in such slight measure in the Sacrament of Penance, is a different thing from that which the sinner should voluntarily take on himself, in order to atone for the insult he has offered to God.

What would you think if I could represent to you the customs of the early Christians, the penitents, without regard to sex or condition, who had to prostrate themselves at the church door, allowing themselves to be trodden under foot by those who came in or went out, and imploring their prayers with tearful voice? What, you say, was the meaning of all this? That the sinner must punish himself, or be punished; that he who has gratified himself unlawfully, must deny himself lawful pleasures.

And we, who have committed, perhaps, more grievous sins, having fulfilled the penance enjoined by the confessor, are completely satisfied. We enjoy our sleep, we laugh and amuse ourselves; we eat and drink, and do what we please, just as if we had not committed any sin whatever. Fasting, bodily austerities, and hair-shirts are left to people who live in convents and monasteries. Such mortifications are good enough for great sinners like them, but not for us, who live in the world. We have no need of them. As if God had less claim on the children of the world on account of their sins, than on his own beloved servants. No, says St. Cyprian, speaking of all without exception, “the penance should not be less than the crime for which it is inflicted.” Every mortal sin deserves eternal punishment, and it is only just that a life long penance should follow it. Some will say: I know I am a sinner and that I am bound to make satisfaction to God for the insult I have offered him but I can manage that in another way, namely, by exciting myself to a deep sorrow when I think of my past sins, by often making an act of contrition, by gaining the indulgences granted by the Church, and by other meritorious good works. If I have

recourse to means of that kind, I need not afflict my body. As long as sufficient atonement is made, it comes to the same thing in the end. Ah! Listen. Since the body has sinned as well as the soul, the body must also satisfy for sin by penance. This is a duty you owe not only to God, but also

II. *To yourself.*

Two men are caught in the act of robbery and murder and are brought before the judge. They are a master and his servant, companions in wickedness. After both have been tried, the master is sentenced to be broken on the wheel, while the servant is to be allowed to go scot-free. Ask even a child if this is just. Tell him moreover, that half or more than half the booty was given to the servant, who misled, tempted or forced his master into the commission of the crime, yet he is set free while the master is executed. Who would not cry out against such injustice! If the guilt of the one exceeds that of the other, so should his punishment also. And if any favor is to be shown to either, then the master should be acquitted while the wicked servant should be made to suffer for the crime. Now, whenever a mortal sin is committed, there robbery and murder both are committed. God is robbed of his honor and glory, and Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is again crucified. Who is guilty of this murder and theft? The human soul; for without its consent, no sin can be committed. But it is not alone in its wickedness; generally speaking, it has a companion. The body with its outward senses must help accomplish the sinful action. The soul, while united to the body, cannot even conceive a single thought, unless it receives by the imagination, through the senses, the form wherewith to invest it. Sins of outward act are done by the body. So that both body and soul are caught in the very act of sin by the almighty God, brought before his judgment-seat, and there declared worthy of punishment. Which of the two must be punished? Must the soul alone do penance and bewail its sins with bitter tears of sorrow? Is the body to go free altogether, and enjoy its usual comforts? Is that just? If the body has shared the guilt, why should the soul alone be condemned to suffer?

But perhaps the body can boast of a more noble descent than the soul? Sometimes in worldly tribunals a criminal is acquitted, or his punishment is lessened on account of nobility or birth. Alas! No, the body is most miserable in its origin! A thing of dust and ashes. Without the soul it is nothing but a sink of corruption and the food of worms? The soul, on the contrary, is an immortal and beautiful spirit, created to the image and likeness of God; it is the lawful lord and master of the body, which must serve it as its obedient subject.

Now, which of the two has the greater share of the plunder, when sin is committed? Which has the greater pleasure in the sinful act? The master or the servant? The body or the soul? Apart from the satisfaction arising from pride and vain honor, all vices procure for the body some sensual gratification or ward off from it something unpleasant and disagreeable. They aid it to enjoy itself, eat, drink, and sleep well, be well clad and comfortably housed, and have nothing to suffer, that eyes, ears, tongue, hands, taste, smell,

and touch may have the delights they long for. In a word, it is, generally speaking, for the sake of the body and its senses that God is abandoned and despised, that the precious soul is ruined, and the joys of heaven forfeited, while the soul has the very least share of the advantage, and the greatest of the injury and malice resulting therefrom.

Finally, if the instigator of a robbery or murder has not the least claim to mercy, and deserves the severest punishment, how can the body be spared, when there is question of satisfying for sin? For it alone not only shows the soul how to sin, and gives it occasion thereto, but continually coaxes and impels it, forces it, so to say, to consent to its desires. “From whence are wars and contentions among you?” asks St. James: “Are they not hence? From your concupiscences, which war in your members?” (Jas. 4: 1). And St. Paul complains that: “The good which I will, I do not: but the evil which I will not, that I do. . . For I am delighted with the law of God, according to the inward man: but I see another law in my members, fighting against the law of my mind, and captivating me in the law of sin, that is in my members” (Rom. 7: 19, 23).

This we know from our own sad experience. Although reason has received from God such authority over the body that the latter cannot open an eye, or move hand or foot, without the consent of the will, yet the flesh refuses obedience, and obstinately declines to hearken to the command of the reasoning will. The Saints themselves felt and bewailed the unceasing stings of concupiscence. St. Paul, that vessel of election, after having suffered many trials of this sort, sighs forth: “Unhappy man that I am who shall deliver me from the body of this death ?”

And yet, when the poor soul wearied out with the struggle, consents to sin, and the question arises as to who must atone for the injury offered to God, sentence is at once pronounced against the soul. By its contrition and sorrow, it is expected to make up for everything, while the reckless instigator of all the evil, the body, is allowed to rest and enjoy itself, seeking its comfort without the least restraint. Reason, where art thou? Is this right? No, the body should do penance also. And woe to us, if we allow it to go unpunished! The just God will not permit the flesh to be without its share of suffering. He can send a countless number of diseases, an unlimited number of misfortunes, innumerable crosses and trials, with which to contradict at pleasure the desires of the flesh; while death is always ready to do his bidding, snatching away husband, wife, child, or dear friend, and depriving life of all its joys and consolation.

Therefore, sinner, hasten to be on the safe side, and anticipate the divine punishments by voluntary mortifications. “You must either punish yourself,” says St. Augustine, “or God will punish you.” Prudence teaches us to choose the lesser of two evils. A single slight but voluntary mortification of the senses, or of the appetites, is of more value in the sight of God, as an atonement for our sins, than severe punishments, suffered against our will.

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