

V2_2nd_of_Lent= The Necessity of Fasting, as a Penance
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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
SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT

The Necessity of Fasting, as a Penance

“There appeared to them Moses and Elias talking with him” Matt 17: 3

Why did our Saviour make choice of Moses and Elias, instead of so many other holy Patriarchs, as witnesses of his transfiguration and heavenly glory? St. Jerome answers: “Our Lord wishes to have Moses and Elias with him in his transfiguration, on account of their having united with him in fasting.” Moses and the prophet Elias, each fasted forty days and nights consecutively, and therefore our fasting Redeemer, whom they had prefigured, wished them to share in his glory, in order to show the world that they who fast are the most fitted for the glory of heaven. My dear brethren, let us consider, today, that we are bound to observe the Lenten fast,

I. *Because, as Christians, we are bound to do penance,* and

II. *Because, of all penitential works, fasting is the chief, the most suitable, and the most convenient for all men.*

I. He who has sinned grievously must do penance; not merely the penance that the priest imposes on us in confession, for, generally speaking, it is so light, according to modern practice, that it scarcely deserves the name of penance. I speak now of that penance, of that special virtue, distinct from other virtues, which St. Thomas calls an act of justice, and

whereby the repentant sinner pays his debt to God, and voluntarily punishes himself for the evil he has done. One or other of two things must be done, says St. Gregory, (speaking for the sinner): “Either God must punish me, and I must accept the punishment willingly, acknowledging my guilt, or else I must perform works of penance according to the number of my sins, even if I were assured by a revelation that all my sins are forgiven. “I feared all my works,” says holy Job, speaking to God, “knowing that thou didst not spare the offender” (Job 9: 28). “Yes,” comments St. Gregory, on those words: “God pardons the repentant sinner in so far that he receives him with joy again into his friendship, but he does not pardon him completely, so as to leave him altogether unpunished, because he does not permit sin to go unchastised, for, either the sinner inflicts punishment on himself, or God inflicts it on him.”

Adam and Eve were pardoned by God for their disobedience, yet they and their descendants were condemned to hard work, to suffering, and to misery of all kinds. Again Moses, and Miriam, his sister, kings David and Ezechias were all examples of this truth in the Old Law; whilst in the New, Magdalene and Peter were assured by Jesus Christ himself, that their sins were forgiven, yet their subsequent lives were most penitential.

But why speak only of sinners? Jesus Christ, the sinless Son of God, incarnate holiness and innocence itself, lived and died a penitent. The holy Fathers ask why it is that our Lord, whose soul, from the first moment of his conception, enjoyed the beatific vision, did not also assume a glorious body, which certainly was due to his sacred humanity? Why by a great and constant miracle, did the happiness of his soul impart no happiness to his body? Why did nature behold in greatest amazement, united in the same Man, the highest dignity and the deepest abasement, superabundant wealth and extreme poverty, perfect happiness and the greatest misery, heavenly joys, and sorrow even to death? Our Saviour came into the world as a willing victim to satisfy the divine justice for our sins, and as he assumed the figure and appearance of a sinner, it was not fitting for him to live in pomp and magnificence, in honor and glory before the world, and to lead a life of comfort and pleasure, but as a penitent, he had to endure punishment and trials, pains and torments, suffering and the cross. It was not becoming for him to bear our sins in his glory. Now, if Jesus Christ, the innocent Son of God, who with even one sigh in a glorified body could have amply satisfied the justice of God for an infinite number of sins, if he spent his whole life in constant mortification of his body, because he had merely the figure and appearance of a sinner (voluntarily assumed in order to satisfy for the sins of others), how unjust and inconsistent it is for one who knows that he has committed grievous sins to lead a comfortable, easy life, and to avoid all bodily mortification. It remains true, then, that he who has sinned mortally, unless God mercifully punishes him in this life, must necessarily do penance and punish himself.

And who will dare to say that he has never sinned? If we had never done any evil whatever, original sin alone, in which we are conceived and born, would be a sufficient reason for doing penance all our lives. For it is in punishment for that sin that we are banished to this earth, this valley of tears, as the proper home of mortification and penance. How much

more, then, are we not bound to do penance, when we consider the many actual sins we have committed in thought, word, deed, and omission, from the time when we first came to the use of reason.

Let no one say or think: I have sinned, I acknowledge it; I have sinned often and grievously; but I have long since repented. I have made a good confession, and I am firmly resolved never again during my whole life to offend God by mortal sin. Moreover, I will try to obtain remission of the punishment still due to my past sins, as well as of that which I deserve for my slight daily transgressions, by gaining indulgences, so that I do not stand in need of any special works of penance. Your conclusion does not hold good. You say that you have repented of and confessed your sins; and you have done perfectly right. You say that you are determined never to commit a mortal sin again. Quite right. It would be a great mistake for you not to make such a resolution. You try to gain the indulgences that are so liberally granted now by our holy mother the Church. A very wise thing, indeed for thereby you can blot out a part, or, if the indulgence is plenary, the whole of the punishment still due to your sins. But by doing that, you do only one part of what the virtue of penance requires of you. Where is the other part? You must atone to God for the injury you have offered him, and you must punish your own willfulness. This you cannot do by the mere purpose of not sinning again, or by gaining indulgences. It is by frequent mortification and voluntary penances, as St. Thomas of Aquin says, that you must fulfill this latter requirement of penance: "Satisfaction must be made by penitential works." But perhaps you do not know what penance to inflict on yourself? Learn then from this present holy season. Fast, at least, by way of satisfaction for your sins; and fast strictly, as becomes a Christian, and the law of the Church. For of all penitential works,

II. Fasting is the chief the most suitable, and the most convenient for all men.

The belief that fasting is the chief penitential work is grounded upon Holy Scripture which, in exhorting the sinner to do penance almost always puts fasting in the first place. "Now, therefore," saith the Lord: "Be converted to me with all your hearts." In what manner? "In *fasting*, and in weeping, and in mourning" (Joel 2: 12)."Blow the trumpet in Sion, sanctify a fast (Ibid.15, 16). "They proclaimed a fast, and put on sack-cloth from the greatest to the least" (Jon. 3: 5), was said of the penitent Ninivites. "They proclaimed a *fast* before the Lord to all the people in Jerusalem, and to all the people that were come together out of the cities of Juda to Jerusalem "(Jer. 36: 9); was said of the penitent Israelites when the prophet Jeremias exhorted them to be converted from their wickedness. Again, when the prophet Samuel converted them from idolatry, the same Israelites "*fasted* on that day, and they said there: We have sinned against the Lord" (1 Kings 7: 6). We read of Achab that, when he was humbled, "he put hair-cloth upon his flesh, and *fasted*, and slept in sack-cloth, and walked with his head cast down" (3 Kings 21: 27). The penitent king David says of himself: "I humbled my soul with fasting" (Ps.34:13). "My knees are weakened through *fasting*, and my flesh is changed for oil" (Ibid. 108: 24). St. Paul makes the same confes-

sion of his own personal mortification: “In hunger and thirst, in *fastings* often” (2 Cor. 11: 27). Do you wish says St. Ambrose, to know how to appease the God whom you have offended? “Then you must fast; for fasting is a sacrifice of reconciliation, that blots out sin altogether.”

Again, I have said, that fasting is the most suitable of all penitential works. Why? “That they might know,” answers the Holy Ghost, “that by what things a man sinneth, by the same also he is tormented” (Wisd. 11: 17). St. Paula of Rome, as St. Jerome tells us, used to scourge herself daily even to blood, while she constantly shed tears of contrition. If any one advised her to mitigate the severity of her penance she would answer: “The pleasures with which I formerly indulged my body must be paid for by these penances, and the laughing and amusements of my youth, by constant weeping.” Now, since it was by gluttony that the first sin came into the world, that, gluttony is the origin, so to speak, of all our sins, no more suitable satisfaction can be offered for them than fasting and abstinence. As we were driven out of Paradise with Adam, our first father, by gluttony and disobedience, he who wishes to regain Paradise must do so by fasting and obedience.

Finally, amongst all works of penance, fasting is the most convenient for all kinds of people. How so? Because it is feasible, it is inexpensive; nay more, it is economical, since a great deal of money that would otherwise be spent on the pleasures of the table, is thereby saved. It is easy for the poor to fast, for they often have little or nothing to satisfy their hunger. Weak and delicate people, too, find fasting easy; generally speaking, they have little appetite, and hardly strength enough to digest their food. Hard-working laborers, spend, so to speak, the greater part of their lives in fasting and abstinence; for they have hardly anything to eat with their bread and water, unless, perhaps, a plate of vegetables cooked in fat. All these people fast and do penance enough, if they only offer up to God by a supernatural intention their poverty and want, their sickness and delicacy, their labor and toil, their bad and insufficient nourishment, and the other trials they have to endure daily, humbly acknowledging that they deserve such trials on account of their former sins, and that they now bear them by way of atonement. Ah yes, good people; think of this daily; see that you have God as your Friend by having a good conscience, and do not forget the good intention, if you wish your troubles to be profitable to you.

There remain, then, only the wealthy and luxurious who fare abundantly and delicately every day, and lead easy, self-indulgent lives. What penance can such people perform in satisfaction for their sins? Hard beds, hair-disciplines, iron chains, or girdles? They shudder and protest at the bare mention of such things. Frequent fasting and abstinence are therefore the most convenient means of mortification and penance for such luxurious souls.

Tell me, in God’s name, you who refuse to fast as you ought, although all are bound to it under pain of sin, in what have your necessary penances hitherto consisted? Perhaps in frequent vigils and interruptions of your nights rest? Yes, I quite believe that you have often done something of the kind in pleasant company, at evening parties, at balls and dances, to say nothing of things that are still worse; but is that the way to satisfy God for

the injuries you have offered him, to punish yourselves for your sins, and blot out the chastisement due to them? If any one were to advise you to sacrifice a few hours of unnecessary sleep in order to go to Mass daily, oh, that (you urge), would be too much, altogether, to expect from you. "If I did that, you complain: my head would be heavy with sleep the whole day long, and I would not be able to attend to my business!" And yet, if you refuse to observe the Lenten fast, in what does your penance consist?

You must confess that you have often offended the great God. Have you at least borne with patience and in atonement for your sins, those annoyances and trials that are common to all men, such as heat and cold, rain and wind, and the insults and trouble that others sometimes cause you? Have you regarded them as a well deserved punishment of your sins, saying with Joseph's brethren in prison: "We deserve to suffer these things, because we have sinned against our brother" (Gen. 42: 21). Yea, against our adorable Brother, Jesus Christ! Perhaps, on the contrary, you have regarded the least annoyance with displeasure; nay, have murmured against it, and given way to cursing and imprecations on account of it, thus increasing the punishment due to your sins, while in other things, in eating, drinking, sleeping, resting, in dress and in entertainments, you have always sought your own comfort, and tried to gratify your sensuality. And yet you wish to evade the law of fasting? Yet you pretend you must eat flesh-meat, and have a full, or at least a half meal in the evening, lest you should suffer from the want of food, or injure your health? Where, then, I again ask, is your penance? Where the atonement to God for the injuries you have offered him? Where the punishment of your repeated revolts against him? Self-indulgent, pampered Christians! Will you not be afraid to appear before your crucified Judge, who taught men by word and example, that violence alone can carry off the kingdom of heaven? Do you, perhaps, wish to leave the punishment of your sins till the next life? Ah, woe to you, if so; for far more terrible instruments of penance and a more rigorous fast await you there! How will you be able to endure them, if you now find it so hard to fulfill the easy law of fasting?

Oh! No, my beloved, acknowledge your guilt; humbly confess that you have sinned, sinned often, sinned grievously, and declare your willingness to do penance. Continually mortify your flesh and its concupiscences, and bear patiently all the trials and crosses of this life. If not reasonably dispensed, strictly observe the fast of Lent, escaping by that slight penance the well-deserved and severe torments of the next life, hoping to arrive, one day, at your heavenly Home, where, according to God's promise, all his children will feed at his bounteous banquet for all eternity. Amen.



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