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Remember that Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday this week are EMBER DAYS.

Observe the laws of Fast and Abstinence.

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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

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Penance in Prosperity and in Adversity

*"Who art thou?"* John 1:59.

"Who are you? Are you a sinner who has offended your God? If you are, you must do penance; not merely the light penance enjoined on you in confession, but you must endeavor, in the spirit of contrition, to make atonement to God for the injuries offered him, and to chastise the wantonness of your flesh, which was the instigator and occasion of your sins. "Who are you?" Are you a prosperous man, who lives in comfort or luxury, or are you poor and in adversity, so that you have many crosses and trials to contend with? Learn then from this sermon

*I. What sort of penance they must do who live in prosperity, and*

*II. What sort of penance they must perform who suffer adversity.*

I. Some people when they hear works of penance mentioned immediately imagine all kinds of fearful mortifications, such as the Saints practised, under the inspiration of a heroic sanctity. They shudder at the thought of fasting on bread and water, sleeping on bare boards, or walking barefoot in processions and pilgrimages.

My dear brethren, if such things were really demanded of us by the divine justice, would it be exacting too much from us in satisfaction for the grievous injuries we have offered it? Would such penance be too severe for the flesh that has merited hellfire by its excesses? Would it be too much to escape the tedious torments of purgatory? Or too great a price for the indescribable, eternal joys of heaven? Our God is a God crowned with thorns; a God whose whole body was torn with scourges, whose hands and feet were pierced with nails, who suffered all the torments of hunger and thirst, and whose only refreshment was vinegar and gall; who died a public and shameful death on the cross, and yet, we plead that we, his members, are too weak, too delicate to undertake any austerities!

With the prudence of the flesh, we urge that we must not injure our health, we must do nothing to shorten our life, which we are bound, by the law of God, to preserve for his service. I do not mean to say that all, without exception, should practice severe austerities; but on the other hand do we plead our weakness or delicacy when there is question of satisfying our impure passions, or of otherwise enjoying ourselves? Oh, no; we are strong enough for that! We are not afraid of wind or weather on such occasions. We do not hesitate to spend whole nights dancing and amusing ourselves, so that we can hardly drag one foot after the other the next day, and yet we do not fear any injury to our health. What trying efforts are made to please others, to satisfy the claims of vanity, to follow the customs of the world! People drink to excess, even against their will, and thus sow the

seeds of many a disease, solely for the sake of the company in which they are. They never think of their health then. Numbers of women and girls actually torture themselves (would that they did as much for God's sake!), in order to follow the fashion, with tight lacing and narrow shoes, (so that every step must be a torment to them), their teeth chattering meanwhile from the cold, on account of the low-necked dresses they wear in the depth of winter. If they only suffered as much for the sake of satisfying for their sins and going to heaven! But they do it solely to please men; and they are not the least afraid of injuring their health thereby, or of overtasking their strength. Yet these very people are too weak to abstain a little now and then, from food and drink. They are too delicate to wear a penitential girdle, or to suffer the least inconvenience or cold, to atone for their sins. Their health will not allow them to rise a little earlier in the morning, I will not say, to deprive themselves of sleep during the night, in order to praise God. Oh, no; we have enough health and strength for vice and vanity, but we are too delicate to practice penance and mortification.

I do not exhort or advise all, without exception, to practice great penances. No; for even the holiest and greatest penitents have not always made use of them, nor have they employed them all at once. In this, as in other matters, reason, common sense and the counsel of one's confessor must be considered. Different people require different penances; one must mortify himself in the time of temptation, another, when he enjoys interior peace; and the penance that can be employed now and then with great profit would lose all its value, if employed constantly.

There are easy ways of doing penance and mortifying one's senses and passions which can be reasonably practiced by all, and which when animated by a pure intention, are of the greatest use in atoning for sin and gaining merit. A penance of this kind would be, for instance, to keep one's eyes fixed on the ground for a certain time, and not to look at some pleasing object or person, saying in the heart; "For thy sake, O God, I will refrain from looking at what would give me pleasure!" The youthful St. Aloysius Gonzaga was, for three whole years, a page in the service of Mary of Austria, queen of Spain, who was regarded as a miracle of beauty. Aloysius had to be in her presence daily; but he never as much as knew her by sight. When he was asked how she looked he had to answer candidly that he could not tell, as he had never seen her. I happen to hear a noise in the street; my first inclination is to run to the window to see what it is about; but suddenly, I restrain myself, and make up my mind not to look out, in order to mortify myself for God's sake. And the same may be said of other things that we willingly look at. St. Francis Borgia, while he was still in the world, as duke of Gandia, used frequently to mortify himself in that way; he was passionately fond of hawking, and often, when the hawk was on the point of seizing its prey, he would turn away his eyes, in order to make a sacrifice to God of the pleasure he would have had in looking at what was the most interesting part of the sport. Again: I am anxious to hear something new or curious, but I restrain myself; or, if something is being told in my presence, I try to divert my attention, so as not to understand the subject of conversation. There is a fair and fragrant flower in the garden; my nostrils long to inhale its odor; my hand is already stretched out to pluck it, but, for God's sake, I overcome myself, and let it be. I have a fine opportunity to give a sharp answer, but I mortify myself, and hold my tongue. I have a great dislike for a certain person, and cannot bear to be in his company; but I do violence to myself, and speak to him in a friendly manner, although very much against my inclination. I go to visit a poor sick man, as the Christian law exhorts me, and, in spite of my natural repugnance, I attend to his wants and make his bed. And so on. Such penitential works as these, my dear brethren, do not cost a drop of blood, nor cause pain to any member of the body. They appear very trifling and insignificant, and not beyond the strength of a child; yet you may be assured that they are of great importance in the sight of God, and the habit of practicing them is a sign of no mean virtue. They attract no notice, and demand no great effort; but they sometimes better atone for sin, than daily fasting or a severe discipline.

With regard to the sense of taste, if, beyond the ordinary fast days, one cannot, or will not suffer hunger or thirst, there are yet plenty of opportunities of overcoming one's self. For instance, by not tasting an apple or some other delicacy that comes in one's way outside of meal times; by standing up from table, before being fully satisfied; by not using salt or other condiments with articles of food that are insipid without them; by either abstaining completely from a certain thing that one is fond of, or at least by allowing the best bits of it to remain untasted; by not eating or drinking at once when one is suffering from hunger or thirst, but waiting a few minutes, although one has the food or drink in his hand. Oh, certainly, a mortification of that kind is most acceptable to God!

King David showed great bravery and fearlessness when he attacked the giant Goliath with his shepherd's sling, and cut off his head; but, according to the testimony of the holy Fathers, he gained a still greater victory when he was leading his army against the Philistines. The heat of the day and the numerous cares that oppressed him caused him then to suffer from violent thirst and exhaustion, so that he cried out: "Oh, that some man would give me drink of the water out of the cistern, that is in Bethlehem by the gate" (2 Kings 23:15). Three of his bravest soldiers had hardly heard this wish of their king, when they strove to fulfill it. There was no way for them to get at the cistern, but to break through the enemies' camp. This they did with the greatest heroism, filled a vessel with the water of the cistern, and brought it to the king. David, who was looking out for them eagerly, at once grasped the vessel, and was about to raise it to his lips, when he suddenly looked up to heaven and, with unexampled heroism, poured the coveted water on the ground without tasting it: "But he would not drink," says the holy Scripture, "but offered it to the Lord" (Ibid. 16). Thus he sacrificed to God the refreshment that he could have taken without sin, nay that was almost necessary to him under the circumstances.

Because he remembered that he had acted unlawfully, he wished to abstain even from lawful enjoyments. He whose conscience reproaches him with having indulged too much in sensual pleasures during his youth, or later on in life, so that he has sinned like David, or even worse, now, that he understands the matter more clearly, should use the same severity with himself, and abstain frequently from pleasures that are innocent, lawful, and remote from all danger of offending God. For it is but right that he should now practice self-restraint on the narrow path of virtue, and serve God zealously, since he formerly gave a loose rein to his passions on the broad road that leads to destruction.

Finally, with regard to the chastisement of the body, if the severe penances of the Saints inspire us with horror and fear, why should we not make up our minds to stand for an hour to hear the word of God in a sermon, although it seems to us rather an uncomfortable position? I know very well that there are ladies and gentlemen who think that an excessive inconvenience, and who, to avoid it, remain away from a sermon that would perhaps be of more use to them than hearing Mass of devotion or going to holy Communion; but when there is question of witnessing a play at the theatre, or seeing a great man enter the town in public procession, they can stand for hours without complaining. Why should we not, now and then, look out for an uneven piece of wood, or a stone, and kneel on it for a while in order to practice that little mortification whilst praying to God? And in the evening, before going to bed, could we not unobserved pray for a short time with outstretched arms, or prostrate ourselves on the ground, kissing it in sign of humility and of our sincere acknowledgment that, since we have offended God, we are not worthy to be on the earth? Every day, we have opportunities of mortifications of that kind. For instance, in the morning, when we awake, and are tempted to lie still a little longer, let us rise at once, and thus begin the day with an act of mortification, sacrificing for God's sake that pleasure of a few moments. Believe me, my dear brethren, it requires frequently a great amount of self-denial to deprive one's self of even a few moments' rest in that way. The pleasure taken away from the body is very small, but the gain to the soul is great. Another opportunity of daily mortification is offered us by the changes of the weather; it is either too harsh and windy, or too cold and rainy, or too hot and sweltering. Oh, there are only too many who are so delicate that they neglect church and sermon, because it is either too cold, or too hot! Is it to much to bear patiently with an inconvenience of that kind, which no one can avoid, and to offer it to God in atonement for our sins?

All that I have said on this subject amounts to this: He who has sinned must do penance, and not treat his flesh too delicately, but often deprive it of even lawful pleasures and enjoyments, since he has unlawfully indulged it in forbidden pleasures. Curious eyes and ears, talkative and defamatory tongue, unchaste and unjust hands, wanton and dissolute flesh, what else are ye but arms with which wickedness makes war on the Most High? St. Paul warns us against that abuse in these words: "Neither yield ye your members as instruments of iniquity unto sin" (Rom. 6:13); rather, he continues: "Present yourself to God, as those that are alive from the dead; and your members as instruments of justice unto God" (Ibid.), which is done by those who make war on themselves. If you still find it too difficult to thus practice constant mortification of the senses, then imitate the willing debtor who desires, but is not able to pay at once all he owes. Every day he subtracts something from his unnecessary household expenses; today a shilling, tomorrow another, and so on, until he has gathered together the necessary sum. In the same way, today, you can mortify your eyes, tomorrow your mouth, and the day after some other sensual desire. Say, with the servant in the Gospel who was unable to pay the ten thousand talents he

owed his master: "Have patience with me, and I will pay thee all" (Matt. 18:26); little by little the whole debt shall be paid off. Thus, while Christians learn that penance is necessary for those who live in comfort and prosperity, they must also know that it is necessary even for those repentant sinners whose lives are hard and full of trials.

"God help us!" I think I hear some of my listeners exclaim "and do you expect us to do penance also? Heaven knows we have penance enough! We are so poor that we must beg our bread from door to door; is not that sufficient? We and our children suffer in secret the pangs of hunger and thirst, and for shame dare not beg; is not that penance enough?" "I," says another, "have been for a number of years bed-ridden with a grievous illness, and cannot even get up to go to church; is not that penance enough?" "From morning till night," says the laborer, "I must be at work, in order to earn my bread by the sweat of my brow; is not that penance enough?" "Are not the constant cares and troubles of the married state sufficient punishment for the sins that we married people commit? Is it not hard enough night and day to have to care for a house full of little children, obstinate and disobedient, sickly and peevish children? To have to live with a passionate; ill-tempered, drunken husband, who beats me if I say a word to him, or with a discontented, peevish, idle, or extravagant wife?" "Is it not penance enough to have to bear with a brother or sister, who worries me the whole day long, and who is full of faults?" "Is it not penance enough to have to run up and down from morning till night, and yet not succeed in pleasing my master or mistress?" "Is it not hard enough to be deprived of father and mother, and to have to submit to persecution and ill-treatment as a poor orphan?" Wherever we turn, we find crosses and trials; are they not penance enough? Must we chastise our bodies in the bargain? Must we. . . Enough, dear Christians, it is not my intention to inflict new torments on you by way of penance; I freely acknowledge that you have often enough to suffer. One thing, however, you must not forget; there is a great difference between suffering *and* suffering. To have to endure labor and trouble, care and vexation, to suffer hunger and thirst, crosses and misery, is not always to do penance. Otherwise even horses and beasts of burden would do penance, for they often have to work hard, and to bear hunger and thirst and cruel treatment. Cain was sent into banishment and misery, and yet he did not do penance. The impenitent thief hung on the cross, and died as well as Christ; but he did not do penance. *To suffer without the proper motive* is not to atone for sin, while to suffer with impatience and murmuring, instead of being an atonement for sin, is rather collecting new material for penance, and adding to our punishment. The suffering that avails to the atonement for our sins must be endured willingly and with a proper motive.

And what, you ask, is suffering willingly? You must make a virtue of necessity. By patience, contentment, and a good intention you must change into a voluntary penance that which, at first, happened against your will and appeared hard and disagreeable to you. This is the teaching of the Council of Trent: "So generously does God act towards us, that we can satisfy God the Father, through Jesus Christ, for our sins, not only by performing voluntary penances, or the satisfaction imposed on us by the priest in confession, but also by patiently bearing the temporal chastisements inflicted on us by God."

Penitent sinners, cry out with the prophet David: "I am ready for scourges. . . I will declare my iniquity, and I will think for my sin" (Ps. 37:18, 19); or with the good thief on the cross: "We indeed suffer justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds" (Luke 23:41). With a like will and intention, dear Christians, make penances of your daily crosses, and then, as I freely acknowledge once more, you do not need any others. One can easily err through imprudence in self-inflicted penances; but yours come straight from the hand of God, and if you receive them as I have said, there is no chance of your making a mistake. If you give way to impatience and discontent under protracted trials, what good will that do you? You will have to suffer all the same, and your sufferings will be profitless. Console yourselves with the thought of the joy that is in store for you. When the sick man is in the hands of the surgeon, he cries out against the burning and cutting, and the bitter remedies, but when he is cured, and his wounds are healed, he kisses with joy the hand, the knife, the iron, that inflicted the salutary wound; the doctor becomes his dearest friend, to whom, under God, he owes his life. Believe me, my dear brethren, it will be just the same with you. Like the sufferer under the knife, you will sometimes cry out, and complain of your crosses as cruel; but wait till your cure is accomplished, and you will bless God for having sent them for the good of your souls.

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