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*Do penance for the kingdom of heaven is at hand  
Unless you do penance, you shall all likewise perish.*



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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 LENT

The Necessity of Fasting in Order to Avoid Sin

*“When a strong man armed keepeth his court, those things are in peace which he possesseth.” St. Luke 11:21.*

“When a strong man armed keepeth his court,” says our dear Lord, “those things are in peace which he possesseth.” What arms are we to use, besides prayer, in order to obtain this much desired peace? Fasting and abstinence, of which we have treated already during this holy season, are the chief, the most suitable, and the most convenient arms for this purpose, for all classes of men. Fasting not only blots out past sins, but also preserves us from future sins. Hence,

- I. If there were no obligation to fast, all men would still be bound to fast, in order to be preserved from sin and saved from its punishments; and hence, also,*
- II. All who are able, should observe the Lenten fast.*

I. Mankind, in the sight of God, may be divided into two classes, innocent or just, and transgressors. Both are bound to do penance, as was declared by those two chief preachers of mortification in the Gospel, Jesus Christ and his holy precursor, John the Baptist. John went about everywhere crying out: “Do penance for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (St. Matthew 3:2). Christ followed him, saying: “Unless you do penance, you shall all likewise perish” (St. Luke 53:3). The first exhorts men to penance by holding out to them the hope of reward, by reminding them of the future joys of heaven; the second urges them to penance by the terrible threat of eternal destruction. Their words were directed to the whole world: to the just and innocent, who are easily moved to do virtuous actions by hope and charity, and to wicked sinners, who must be violently urged thereto by fear. The just must do penance, that they may be preserved from sin; the wicked, that they may cease from sin, or, if they are already converted, that they may not relapse into sin.

The just and innocent, who are in the minority among adults, stand in need of penance as a preservative against sin. No matter how good they are, how deeply grounded in the love of God, or in their resolution never to offend him, they are still but human. Weak, frail, and instable creatures, as they are, the greatest care is requisite to preserve to themselves the costly treasure of divine grace. This is the meaning of the words addressed by the Church to her faithful children when she distributes the ashes at the beginning of Lent: “Remember, man, that thou art dust.” As if she wished to say: Take care, O mortal! Be on your guard! Hitherto, you may have been immovable and strong as a pillar in the house and service of God, yet remember you are but dust, ready to

be blown away by the first wind. Therefore, strengthen yourself with the weapons of the spirit, and chastise your body by fasting and penance.

The first sin in paradise was a violation of the law of fasting. From that hour when our first parents rebelled against God, the flesh, with its concupiscence's and inordinate appetites, rebels against sound reason, and to such an extent, that man's understanding is darkened in supernatural things, his inclinations tend to evil, his will is weak and sluggish in good; and it is only by a great effort that it can be urged to well-doing, or restrained from evil. The guilt of original sin is thoroughly washed away by the waters of holy baptism, yet concupiscence, (which theologians call "the source of sin,") still retains possession of us, and from it arise all temptations, the devil making use of our own flesh and its desires as instruments and abettors to drag the soul into sin. All this is described in a few words, by St. James: "From whence are wars and contentions among you?" he questions. "Are they not hence, from your concupiscence's, which war in your members?" (James 4:1). Therefore, you need not go far to find the cause of the strife; it is the enemy within the walls. Now, the more liberty is allowed to the flesh and its desires, the more it is permitted to enjoy itself, even in lawful things, the more delicately it is nourished, the more obstinate will it become in its rebellion against the spirit, and the more difficult will it be for sound reason to rule it and to keep it within the bounds of God's commandments. It is like a restive horse, which, when kept a long time in the stable and well fed, can be tamed afterwards only with great difficulty. Not without reason is that source of sin in our flesh called, "the fire of concupiscence." The more wood you put on a fire, the greater the heat, and the higher the flames. Pour oil on it, and you will have great difficulty in preventing the whole house from catching fire. To pamper the body, to eat, drink, and sleep according to our desires, is nothing else than to add fuel to the fire of concupiscence to pour oil on the flame. Again, a full stomach is an incentive to lust. Lust is fed by feasting and nourished by pleasure, it is kindled by wine and inflamed by drunkenness. This fire, then, must often be kept under, even by the innocent and the just, or else it will break out into a flame, most dangerous to the soul. This restive horse must frequently be worked, and kept on short rations, if he is to remain obedient to his master, "Reason."

Yes, the most suitable, the safest and the most powerful of all the works of penance is that prescribed to us by the Catholic Church, namely, fasting, and frequent abstinence from food and drink. The Church forbids the use of flesh-meat during Lent, "that our flesh may be subject to the spirit, and our appetites to reason." The chief object of fasting is to subdue the desires of the flesh, for chastity is preserved by fasting. St. Ambrose expresses the same idea in the beautiful words that priests read at Prime in the Divine Office: "May abstemiousness in eating and drinking subdue the pride of the flesh," What is meant by the pride of the flesh? Is not pride only a spiritual vice? How, then, can it be ascribed to the flesh? With very good reason, for is it not pride for the subject to command his sovereign? the servant, his master? the maid, her mistress? Now what is our flesh? A miserable Creature, of vile origin, made of a lump of earth at first, and given over to the reasoning soul to be its servant. Yet, we learn by daily experience, that the flesh arrogates a right over the soul, and frequently importunes it to consent to its wanton desires; nay, it often causes the reasoning soul to obey its sensuality. Is not that an intolerable pride? And what arms shall we take up to tame it? Fasting, abstinence, abstemiousness in eating, can and must subdue this pride and willfulness of the flesh.

As long as Adam observed the abstinence imposed on him by God, he remained a beloved friend of God, but when he followed his inordinate appetites by eating the forbidden fruit, he became a slave of the devil. While he was fasting, he was in Paradise, but hardly had he eaten, when he was cast forth. "Therefore," says St. Ambrose, "no better means of defense can be found, than fasting, against the attacks of the hellish serpent." St. Augustine, commenting on the words of Christ to his disciples, explaining to them why they could not cast out a certain kind of devil, "This kind is not cast out but by prayer and fasting" (St. Matthew 7:20). "See," he says, "how powerful fasting is; it can do what was impossible to the Apostles."

This is the reason why even the most innocent and holy friends of God, fasted so rigorously. According to the testimony of Athanasius, St. Anthony fasted so strictly during his whole life, that sometimes, he neither ate nor drank for two or three days together, and then, on the fourth day, took only a small piece of bread. While Hilari- on was still a young man of fifteen, he fasted just as strictly; he never ate till sundown, and then nothing but a few dried figs; nay, he often went four whole days without food or drink of any kind, so that he was sometimes hardly able to breathe, through hunger and exhaustion. St. Ambrose, as bishop, was for many years accustomed

to eat but once a day, and then very little. The holy cardinal, Charles Borromeo, although he was delicately nurtured, always abstained from meat, fish, eggs, and wine; and during the last years of his life he used to take nothing but dry bread and water. Aloysius, who was more like an angel than a human being in innocence, used to weigh his food most accurately every day, lest he should give his body more nourishment than was necessary to preserve its life for the service of God. In a word, among all who were remarkable for sanctity, we read of none who attained it without fasting. Let no one imagine that those Saints fasted so rigorously merely in order to serve God more perfectly, and to gain more glory in heaven. Truly, that was one reason why they did it, but there was another, besides they regarded fasting as necessary, for, like other poor mortals, they had to groan and sigh under the slavery of their corrupt flesh, and so they had recourse to fasting, in order to tame its wanton desires and make it submit to reason, lest, if, overcome, they should lose their innocence and holiness. They knew well that, in order to preserve sanctifying grace in their souls, they required a special, powerful, helping grace from God, and they acknowledged that, as long as they continued to do penance, so long would they receive the help of this grace.

Attend to this all you, who pamper your bodies, seek your comfort in all things, gratify your sensuality in eating and drinking, and when Lent comes on, bring forward all kinds of empty pretexts, to excuse yourself from observing the fast; who do not wish to hear a word about Christian mortification and crucifying the flesh, to which our Lord himself so frequently exhorts all men. Under such circumstances, how can you reasonably expect to keep your soul free from other sins, to which the wanton and unmortified flesh is sure to tempt them?

St. Luke describes, in a few words, the eternal ruin of the rich glutton: "And the rich man also died; and he was buried in hell" (St. Luke 16:22). Why? What wrong had he done? Was he, perhaps, guilty of idolatry, or sacrilege? Was he a revengeful man, and a murderer? Or an adulterer, or perchance, a thief? No; we read nothing of the kind in the Gospel. And in what, then, did his guilt consist? Hear the reason why the divine and all just Judge condemned him: "He was clothed in purple and fine linen; and feasted sumptuously every day" (St. Luke 16:19). That was all; yet it was enough to condemn him in the next life to eternal torments, as we see from the words of St. Luke "and he was buried in hell;" and from the answer that Abraham made to his complaints in the midst of his intolerable sufferings: "Son, remember that thou didst receive good things in thy lifetime" (Ibid. 25). Remember what an easy life you had, and therefore, you are now "tormented." But, you will ask, what is the harm in being well dressed, in eating and drinking well every day, and enjoying one's self lawfully? That is the usual mode of life of those who can afford to live in that way. I have nothing to say as to the mode of life common in the world; but the Holy Ghost tells me, "Go not after thy lusts; but turn away from *thy* own will:" for, "if thou give to thy soul her desires, she will make thee a joy to thy enemies" (Ecclus. 19:30, 31). If you make a rule of doing and enjoying everything that is lawful and agreeable, you will not be long without doing something that is unlawful and forbidden, until at last you will enter on the broad and pleasant way that leads to destruction.

II. Therefore, dear Christians, no matter how innocent you are, if you wish to conquer temptation, and preserve yourselves free from sin, you must often mortify your flesh, and especially by frequent fasting and abstinence. What does a gardener do to preserve the good seed he has planted from being eaten up by the birds? He covers the earth with sharp thorns to keep the birds away. That was what the penitent David did, in order to preserve his soul from the attacks of the hellish birds of prey: "I covered my soul in fasting" (Ps. 48:11), an example we should do well to follow. And the same holy doctor writes: "Hunger is a friend of purity, an enemy of lust; while satiety ruins chastity and nourishes concupiscence."

Now, listen to reason. If an innocent man, who has never tasted a forbidden pleasure, nor transgressed the law of God, must still fast and do penance, in order to avoid sin and overcome temptation, how much more necessary must not fasting be to him who has sinned grievously, and who, on account of his former bad habits, is powerfully inclined to sin? For, just as Baptism, although it cleanses the soul from the stain of original sin, still leaves the flesh rebellious against the spirit, so, also, the Sacrament of Penance, although it removes the stain of actual guilt from the soul, leaves behind it two other terrible effects of sin, which the Council of Trent denominates "the relics of sin."

The first is a certain facility and audacity in relapsing into sin. The second, the rebellion and disobedience of the camel appetites, which become more headstrong and obstinate in proportion to the amount of indulgence

conceded them, so that the spirit is weakened and is less able to control them. Hence it happens, that one falls so easily and at the first temptation into his former abominations, and comes to confession with nearly the same sins each time, unless he is particularly careful and does violence to himself constantly. A converted sinner is like a convalescent patient, who is recovering from an attack of fever. He does not suffer so much as during his illness, but for a long time, he feels a weakness and lassitude in his limbs, and if he is not careful and moderate in what he eats and drinks, and runs a great risk of falling sick again. Oh, what manifold mortifications such a person is obliged to practice! How often is he not compelled to abstain from food for which his mouth waters! How often and how unwillingly must he not, quit the table without having fully satisfied his hunger! And if he refuses to do so, he is at once reproved by those around him: "If you go on like that," they say, "you will soon see how it will end with you!" Why, O Christians, are people so careful of the health of the body, while they do so little to keep the precious soul from relapsing into its former maladies? If we can deny ourselves food or drink of which we are very fond for the sake of the body, should we not be much more willing to fast and to overcome ourselves for the sake of the immortal soul?

For that is the *way* in which to destroy, little by little, those relics of sin, and it is prescribed to penitents by the Council of Trent as a most efficacious means to that end. How greatly mistaken, then, are those penitents who, when they have got rid of the heavy burden of their sins at Easter, think and say: "Thank God, that much is done! I am free from that burden. I have confessed all my sins, and performed my penance. I can now enjoy myself in peace." And they proceed to live as if they had never done any wrong. Ah! you must know that you have not yet done enough for your soul. If you have made a good confession, the unclean spirit is certainly driven out of you; the house is swept and garnished. But be careful. What did you hear in today's Gospel? "I will return," says the unclean spirit who has been banished: "I will return into my house whence I came out. Then he goeth and taketh with him seven other spirits, more wicked than himself, and entering in they dwell there. And the last state of that man becomes worse than the first."

Can one who has often sinned and often relapsed after confession reasonably hope to be able to withstand temptation amid the countless dangers and occasions to which he is exposed by an easy, comfortable life, by pampering his body in every way, and eating and drinking as he pleases? Considering the words of St. Paul, "I chastise my body and bring it into subjection; lest, perhaps, when I have preached to others, I myself should become a castaway" (I Cor. 9:27), and (that chastising of the body consisted principally in fasting and abstinence), considering these words, St. Chrysostom cries Out with a deep sigh : "If Paul was so much afraid of sin and reprobation," although he had so often bewailed and done penance for the sins of his life, and had labored more than the other Apostles for the honor of Jesus Christ; although he had converted so many souls by his preaching, and had become, as it were, an angel in the flesh; if St. Paul still thought it necessary to chastise his body by fasting, alas, "What have we to say for ourselves? "What ought not we to do, in order to avoid sin and eternal damnation! Do we still venture to say: "I cannot fast; I must have meat. I must have a full meal in the evening or else I shall become too weak. I shall not be able to sleep, and my health will suffer!"

Away with those deceits and false excuses of sensuality! The health of my soul should certainly be dearer to me than the welfare of my mortal body; and if I cannot preserve it unless I chastise the body by fasting, abstinence, and works of penance, then I am fully determined that the body must suffer. Far be it from me to make use of any pretext whatever to evade the Lenten fast. No, I will fast strictly. Not only will I deprive my stomach of flesh-meat, but my whole body shall have its share of mortification. My eyes, my ears, my tongue, my hands shall fast, that they may neither see, hear, say, nor touch what might be even a remote danger or occasion of sin to them, so that, being thus always armed against my enemy, I shall be able to keep my soul and its salvation in peace, Amen.

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