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Give and it shall be given to you.

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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

FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT

### The Necessity of Alms-Giving for the Avoidance of Sin

*“Whence shall we buy bread that these may eat?” St. John 6:5*

“Whence shall we buy bread that these may eat?” My brethren, whence shall we buy bread to feed the poor and needy in our neighborhood? This is a subject highly deserving of your attention during these days of Lent. Good and salutary as is the law of fasting in itself, yet the Catholic Church does not command her children to fast merely that they may abstain from meat, and eat a full meal but once a day. Amongst other reasons, the Lenten fast is imposed, that what the stomach is deprived of may be given to the poor; that while the stomach is fasting from its ordinary food, the hand may busy itself in generosity to the needy. Hence, they who are blessed by God with wealth are not less obliged to perform the corporal works of Christian charity during Lent, than those who are in good health and strength are bound to do works of penance. Nay, there is no use in fatiguing the body by depriving it of food, unless, at the same time, the members of Jesus Christ, that is, the poor, are fed and nourished by alms-deeds. Therefore, besides fasting, we must also give alms according to our means.

*I. In atonement for our past sins; and*

*II. As a preservative against future sins.*

I. Alms-giving should always accompany fasting; for, it is certain, that of all penitential works none is more efficacious in appeasing God’s anger and obtaining a remission of the punishment still due to our sins, than pure-intentioned alms-giving and generosity to the poor and needy.

This is emphatically and expressly declared in the Holy Scripture by God himself, so that to doubt it would be to call in question the very word of God. “Charity covereth all sins” (Prov.) Again “Before all things, have a constant mutual charity amongst yourselves.” Why? “for charity covereth a multitude of sins” (I Pet. 4:8), so that, even the most grievous sins, when covered by works of charity and mercy, are, as it were, not considered nor punished by God. The elder Tobias, when exhorting his son, recommended him especially to practice charity towards the poor and needy: “For alms deliver from all sin and death” (Tob. 4). The same was afterwards affirmed by the archangel Raphael: “For alms delivereth from death, and the same is that which purgeth away sins, and maketh to find mercy and life everlasting” (Ibid. 12:9). “Give alms,” says Christ himself to the wicked Scribes and Pharisees; “and behold all things are clean unto you” (St. Luke 11:41).

St. Ambrose, considering those words “Water quencheth a flaming fire, and alms resisteth sins” (Ecclus. 3:33); compares alms-giving with the Sacrament of Baptism, and says, alms-giving blots out sin, just as

Baptism extinguishes the fire of hell. Oh, what a good and gracious God we have, he continues; how many powerful means he has supplied us with to enable us to save our souls easily! He has instituted the Sacrament of Baptism, which not only blots out the guilt, but also takes away all the punishment due to all the sins that one has committed. But if a poor, weak mortal offends God grievously after Baptism, and thus again deserves the eternal torments of hell, behold, he has two other means at hand to free himself from sin; the one, the Sacrament of Penance, which takes away the guilt of sin, and the other, alms-giving, which remits the punishment due to it.

The reason of all this is evident. It is an every day saying that Money can do anything. Hence, in the Old Law, God gave this command to judges: "Thou shalt not accept person nor gifts." And he immediately adds the reason: "for gifts blind the eyes of the wise, and change the words of the just" (Deut. 16:19). No matter how pious or just a judge may be, if he accepts a bribe, then good-bye to his justice; his eyes are blinded to the guilt of a criminal; his ears are closed, so that he cannot hear any accusation against him; his hands are tied, and he cannot punish the malefactor as he deserves; his mouth is shut, and cannot pronounce a just sentence. Alas, this is but too true!

Now, what do I mean by all this? Dare we, then, venture to help our case before the divine tribunal with money and presents, so as to gain something to which we have no right? Not a doubt of it. St. John Chrysostom gives an apposite answer, and cries out in astonishment: "O wonderful power of alms-giving! It creeps into the divine tribunal, and there enables us to meet our Judge without fear." For Jesus Christ, the Judge of the living and the dead, stretches forth his hand whenever we give anything to the poor in his name. He it is, who takes the bread, the money, or whatever other gift we bestow, as we know from his own lips: "As long as you did it to one of these my least brethren, you did it to me" (St. Matthew 25:40).

Thus he allows himself to be bribed by the sinner, so that he has no eyes to see his sins, in order to punish them; no tongue to pronounce against him the sentence of eternal death; and no hands to inflict on him the chastisement he so well deserves. The alms he has received, Converts him from a bitter enemy into the dear friend of the sinner, "Give alms and behold all things are clean unto you," give alms, and you will thereby make up for everything.

That was the way in which David tried to make good his cause with the God whom he had offended, as he says himself: "I will wash my hands among the innocent" (Ps. 25:6). But David, what are you thinking of? Will you wash among the innocent those hands that are stained with the filth of adultery, and with the blood of Urias? Will you cleanse them so that they will resemble those of an innocent man? Yes; so clean will I wash them, by giving generous alms to the poor. "I will cleanse my works from the stain of sin, in the layer of alms-giving." In the same way, too, the otherwise impious emperor Zeno succeeded in bribing the Almighty God, so that he escaped the punishment he had long deserved. Baronius, writing of the year 474, relates that a certain poor woman, whom this emperor had persecuted most unjustly, threw herself on her knees before a picture of the Mother of God, and cried out: "Avenge me on Zeno!" Whereupon, the Blessed Virgin answered her: "Believe me, I have not been careless of your interests all this time, and would long ago have inflicted the desired punishment on him; but his hand prevents me." "For he was," says the historian, "very charitable and good to the poor."

Hear, O sinners, you, who on account of the multitude and deformity of your crimes despair of finding mercy and grace at the hands of God, take courage! No matter how great your wickedness, how numerous your sins; not one of you has cause to despond, much less to despair. Only give alms according to your means, and you will find it a most powerful means of obtaining the grace of repentance and God's forgiveness for your sins. King Nabuchodonosor, who was a monster of wickedness, when the prophet Daniel announced to him, in the name of God, the dreadful punishment that was in store for him, could (if he had followed the Prophet's advice), have escaped that punishment by the same means; for Daniel said to him: "Wherefore, O King, let my counsel be acceptable to thee." And what was this counsel? "Redeem thou thy sins with alms, and thy iniquities with works of mercy to the poor: perhaps, he will forgive thy offenses" (Dan. 4:24). Read the Gospel of St. Luke, and there see how Jesus Christ condemns the Pharisees and their hideous vices. "Woe to you, Pharisees!" he says frequently; woe to you, hypocrites "because you are sepulchers that appear not" etc. They are several times condemned and rejected most vehemently. And why? Was there no means of salvation for them? Certainly there was. What was it? Our Lord himself tells them: "But yet that which remaineth, give alms: and behold all things are clean unto you." As if he meant, this is the only chance of salvation remaining for you; give alms and

be generous to the poor So powerful is alms-giving in appeasing the anger of God, and in blotting out or warding off the punishment due to our sins. But it is not less powerful with regard to the other object for which fasting is useful, namely,

*II. To keep our evil inclinations in check, to gain the favor and friendship of God, and to be freed from further sin, and eternal damnation.*

After the concupiscence of the flesh, there is no greater source of sin than the concupiscence of the eyes, the inordinate desire of possessing and increasing one's store of worldly goods, which is called Avarice. If the heart of man is once taken up with this passion, then farewell to devotion, piety, the fear of God, and justice. For there is no law so holy, that the miser is not ready to violate for the sake of money; no sin so great, that he is not willing to commit, if he can add to his store thereby. "Nothing is more wicked than the Covetous man," says the Holy Ghost by the wise Ecclesiasticus: "There is not a more wicked thing than to love money; for such a one setteth even his own soul to sale; because while he liveth, he hath cast away his bowels" (Eccius. 10:9, 10). The miser forgets his own salvation; he forgets all about the kingdom of heaven, for which he is created; he forgets his God and his Creator. Money is his heart, his soul, his only good, his god. And the worst and most dangerous characteristic of this vice is that there is hardly any means of healing it, once it has taken possession of the heart; for the inordinate desire of wealth cannot be satisfied even by the possession of that which it seeks. The more it has, the more it desires; the greater its wealth, the more eager its efforts to accumulate; and while nearly all the other vices decrease with old age, when health and strength begin to fail, avarice grows stronger, and follows a man even to the grave. Therefore it must be a great benefit for the soul to have found a remedy against this vice, for that remedy is also a preservative against countless sins. Is not that so, my dear brethren?

This most powerful remedy is charity and mercy towards the poor. Generosity is a virtue directly opposed to avarice; since it, perforce, takes away the object of concupiscence of the eyes, that is, money and worldly goods, and gives it to others. Now, there can be no better and holier generosity than that which is exercised towards our Lord himself in the person of the poor, by alms-giving. Therefore, he who is charitable to the poor and bestows on them generous alms, sharing his worldly goods with them, has certainly overcome the concupiscence of the eyes, and with it, temptations to many sins and vices. And, as to gaining the favor and friendship of God, and being preserved from further sin and from eternal damnation, who can promise himself that with greater confidence than the generous alms-giver? "Alms shall be a great confidence before the most high God, to all them that give it" (Tob. 4:12), says Tobias to his son; therefore, my son. if you wish to be a friend of God, follow my advice, and give alms out of thy substance, and turn not away thy face from any poor person" (Ibid.).

If an angry God allows himself to be bribed by the alms of a great sinner, and if he is appeased to such an extent, that he is ready to forget his transgressions, and (so to speak), is compelled to give him the grace of repentance, and to remit a great part of the punishment due to his sins, how will not that good and just God be influenced by the alms-giving of one who is already in the state of grace? Can that God, who never allows himself to be outdone by his creatures in generosity, and who expressly says to us: "Give, and it shall be given to you" (St. Luke 6:38), can he, I ask, refuse any favor to him who shares his worldly goods with God's poor children? Could a generous alms-giver be condemned to the everlasting flames of hell by that faithful God, who has declared that, at the Last Day the claim of his elect to his eternal kingdom shall depend upon the diligent and pure-intentioned performance of works of Christian charity? "Come, ye blessed of my Father, possess you the kingdom prepared for you;... for I was hungry, and you gave me to eat" (St. Matthew 25:34, 35). No, there is no place in hell for the generous alms-giver. "For," continues Tobias, "alms deliver from all sin and from death, and will not suffer the soul to go into darkness" (Tob. 4:11). When the city of Sodom was destroyed by fire from heaven on account of its horrible crimes, Lot alone, with his family, was led out of it in safety by the Angels. How did he merit that favor? By his generous alms-giving, for Lot received the Angels into his house, under the appearance of poor wanderers, and entertained them hospitably. The divine fire cannot burn mercy; therefore, let him who wishes to have no reason to fear the flames of hell practice mercy.

Oh, if many of the elect could tell you how they escaped the fire of hell and gained the happiness of heaven, you would indeed, be convinced of the truth of this! St. Peter Damian tells us of a nobleman in Germany who, as he was out hunting one cold winter's day, found a poor, ill-clad widow and her daughter trudging bare-foot

through the snow. Filled with pity for the poor people, he took one of them up on his horse and commanded his servant to take up the other; and so they went on, till they came to an inn, where the nobleman caused the *two* women to be well looked after, and before he went away he gave the mother his own cloak, that she might have some protection against the bitter cold. This act of charity soon met with its evident reward. The nobleman received the grace of a religious vocation, in pursuance of which he left his servants all he possessed in the world, and retired into a monastery, there to serve God for the rest of his life. Not many years after, he fell dangerously ill, and as he was in his death-agony, he commenced to cry out most piteously to the brethren who were standing round: "Help me! Do you not see what a swarm of raging demons are waiting for my poor soul to carry it off to hell?" The brethren began to pray, and tried to console the dying man by telling him to despise the temptations of the Evil One, and to put his trust in God; but all to no purpose. At last, the dying man turned to him who had formerly been his servant on the hunting expedition: "Look," said he to him with a cheerful countenance, "do you not see the woman whom I took up behind me on my horse that day? She is standing by my bedside, holding in her hand the mantle I gave her to protect her from the cold. The moment she entered the room, all the demons took to flight at once; and now, as a reward for my charity, she has invited me to enter into heaven." Having said these words, he gave up his happy soul.

If we were all to look back on our past lives, we should find a great many sins and transgressions of the divine law, for which we are still indebted to the justice of God. Therefore, we have good reason to fear that in those dangerous and troublous times, we shall have some calamity to suffer. If we consider our future lives, we must humbly acknowledge that we are in need of a special grace of God, in order to be preserved from sin; and (what is all important), to be saved from an unhappy death and eternal damnation. Now, we have a sure means of securing both those objects in generous alms-giving and in Christian charity towards the poor. Let us, then, constantly practice this virtue according to our means, and thus bribe our divine Judge to forget our sins, and, if we have not yet repented, to give us the grace of true contrition. By the same means, too, we shall make sure of the friendship of the Most High, so that he will keep us from sin, and will protect us in our last moments from the attacks of the Evil One. A certain rich man being dangerously ill, was warned that it was time for him to give up all unnecessary cares for earthly things, to raise his mind to heaven, and prepare for eternity. "Ah," sighed he, "I see the gate of heaven far off, but I see, too, that it is bolted against me. Who will open it to me, that I may enter?" Such thoughts and words are not unusual with dying people, when they feel the approach of death. And a voice replied to him: "Take your money and make for yourself gold and silver keys, with which you will be able to open a thousand locks. But in order that those precious keys may not be lost, commit them to the charge of the poor. They will keep them safe for you, and will give them over to you without fail at the gate of heaven." The same advice I give to all who are in a position to help the poor. There are some, perhaps, who cannot fast, let them at least open their purse-strings to feed Christ in the person of his poor. Certainly we have abundant opportunities to manifest our generosity. Hundreds suffer the pangs of hunger, either in the public streets or in their own houses, where they cry for bread with their famished children. There are plenty of good and needy people, who, with tears in their eyes, pray for the necessities of life, and often cannot get them. Ah, be merciful and help these worthy people! I repeat to you the advice of Tobias to his son: "According to thy ability be merciful; if thou have much, give abundantly; if thou have little take care even so to bestow willingly a little; for thus thou storest up to thyself a good reward for the day of necessity, that is, for the end of thy life." Christians, let us all profit by this good advice; and we may hope thereby to be freed from the punishment due to our sins, and, that, some day, after our death, the very same poor whom we have helped in this life will, according to the promise of our Lord, receive us into eternal tabernacles. Amen.

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