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U.I.O.G.D.

Ave Maria!

Jesus, Mary, Joseph, we love Thee, save souls  
O God come to our assistance. Jesus, Mary, Joseph please haste to help us!  
+ + + Jesus, Mary, Joseph + + +  
Volume two = The Penitent Christian  
FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT.

### The Blindness and Obduracy of the Sinner, a Punishment of Sin

*“Therefore you hear them not, because you are not of God.” St. John 8:47.*

What terrible words these are! “He that is of God heareth the words of God. Therefore you hear them not, because you are not of God.” To be abandoned by God, to have no part in him, to die in their wickedness, and to be lost forever, this was the most fearful punishment inflicted on the Jews; and it was one that our Lord had often foretold to them with tears in his eyes, namely, that they should become blind and obstinate, and should be rejected by God. There are three kinds of spiritual blindness. The first flies the light so as to have no knowledge of good and evil; the second consists in a culpable ignorance of the divine law and of the duties of a Christian. Of the third I shall now proceed to speak, explaining:

*I. The nature of this divinely inflicted blindness; and*

*II. That as a punishment, this is the most dreadful of all evils.*

I. The terrible spiritual blindness of which I speak to you arises from the habitual commission of grievous sin. It is called a blinding of the understanding and a hardening of the will in wickedness; and it comes to those who refuse to hearken to the voice of God calling them to repentance. “But if thou wilt not hear the voice of the Lord thy God, the Lord strike thee with madness and blindness and fury of mind, and mayest thou grope at mid-day as the blind is wont to grope in the dark, and not make straight thy ways” (Deut. 28:5, 23). Of this blindness, St. Paul says: “Because that, when they knew God, they have not glorified him as God, their foolish heart was darkened. God delivered them up to a reprobate sense, to do those things which are not convenient.” With this blindness and obduracy, God justly punished king Pharaoh, who had so often disobeyed him. The plagues he had to suffer only made *him* more obstinate in refusing to obey the divine command, and let the people of Israel go; but when at length he did let them go, he repented of having done so, pursued them with his whole army, ventured rashly into the Red Sea, in the face of an evident miracle wrought in favor of the Israelites, and was drowned with all his followers. The same blindness was inflicted by God on the obstinate Jews. Yes, it is even the infinitely good and merciful God who thus severely punishes man, when he has borne with his sins for a long time, and often exhorted and warned him to no purpose. Nor is this punishment too severe, it is in accordance with the strictest justice; “for it is a most just punishment of sin that one should lose that which he would

not make a good use of. And that he who deliberately omits to do good, should at last neither know nor understand what good is.”

But that no one may have a mistaken idea of the mercy of God in this matter, as if he deliberately planned the eternal ruin of a man by increasing his guilt, you must not forget how this punishment of blindness and obduracy is inflicted by God. Our God is infinitely good, and patient, and merciful; he never abandons man unless the latter abandon him for too long a time altogether. He does not and cannot wish any one to commit sin, nor can he, nor will he condemn any one to hell who does not himself elect to go there. He rejects no sinner, no matter how great his guilt may be, who does true penance; and he is prepared to receive into his friendship even the most wicked sinner who does penance even at the last moment of his life. Such is the teaching of the infallible word of God in Holy Scripture; such, too, is the experience of many great sinners. If God intended first to abandon us, why did he send his Only-begotten Son down on earth to redeem all men, and show them the way to heaven? Why should that Son have allowed himself to be so cruelly tortured, and to be nailed to the cross for our sake? No, once for all, it is and must be true, that the good God does not wish the death of the sinner, I will that he be converted and live. But now, see how he allows the sinner to become blind and obdurate. In order to avenge himself for the contempt with which he has been persistently treated, he withdraws from the obstinate sinner the graces that he is not at all bound to give him, and which he has hitherto bestowed on him solely out of the superabundance of his goodness; such graces as a clear knowledge of Gospel truths, and vivid lights in the understanding, making him see and dread the malice, deformity and eternal punishment of sin. Neither does God any longer give him those refreshing impulses and sweet inward movements of the will, enabling one to keep his law with ease, to mortify sensuality and evil inclinations, perform the works of Christian piety and charity, bear crosses and trials patiently, and find an efficacious strength in all dangers. Withdrawing these graces from the obstinate sinner, God delivers him over to his own desires and inclinations, as he says by the prophet David, “My people heard not my voice: and Israel hearkened not to me. So I let them go according to the desires of their heart; they shall walk in their own inventions.” And they will do all that sensuality and their own will may suggest to them.

Now, when these graces are thus withdrawn from the sinner and he is given over to his own desires, what happens to him? Alas, the same that happened to our dear Lord, when Pilate delivered him over to the will of the Jews; they fell upon him like wolves, dragged him off to Calvary, and there cruelly murdered Him. O sinner, are you given over to your own evil inclinations? Alas, what will become of you? Nothing else can be the result but that your understanding will be blinded and your will hardened. For when those special graces of God no longer impel you to good and restrain you from evil, if the least temptation or occasion of sin, such as we are daily exposed to, assails you, you will consent to it without the least hesitation, fear, or shame; from one sin you will fall into another, from that into a third, and so on, until your sins are beyond counting. If you throw a stone into a pond, it will at once make a circle in the water; this circle will make another, the other a third, and so it goes on until the last circle is so far away that it vanishes out of sight. So it is also with the heart of the wicked man, which the Holy Scripture compares to a stormy sea. “But the wicked are like the raging sea, which cannot rest.” First comes the habit of sin; from the habit, a concatenation of vices, an ever increasing circle of abominations, a deplorable ebb and flow of sin, and finally, a natural necessity as it were of sinning, so that it is almost impossible to the sinner to amend. His sins cease only with his life.

A dislike for everything good; a disgust for prayer, the holy Sacraments and all works of devotion; an abuse or a lack of relish for the word of God, an increasing desire and inordinate love of temporal goods, like the perpetual sighing of the Jews for the fleshpots of Egypt, all these at last so harden the heart of the sinner, that it becomes insensible to exhortations and threats alike. Temporal blessings affect him no more than trials and adversity. He is as insensible to everything that happens to him as the stone pillar in the field that remains unaffected by wind, rain, or hail.

And what is there to be surprised at in that? The obdurate sinner is blinded once for all; he is incapable, so to speak, of discerning between good and evil, between what is reprehensible and what is praiseworthy: “They have not known nor understood, they walk on in darkness.” The loss of eternal happiness, the bitterness of death, the pains of hell, the remembrance of which used formerly to send a shudder through him, he now utterly disregards. Since he has sunk into the depth of sin, he is no longer afraid of those things; nay, he laughs at them, and affects to disbelieve them. He looks on them as a dream, as mere talk of the priests, mere pointless arrows

which cannot hurt; he is no more frightened at them than a blacksmith's dog is at the hammering to which he has long grown accustomed. Meanwhile, since he loses more and more every day the light and knowledge of divine things, whilst his wickedness is daily on the increase, he at length goes so far that he does not wish to be better, and cannot be worse. Even if it were possible for him to do penance, he would be as far off from it as the demons themselves. Such is the punishment that an angry God inflicts on man for his obstinacy in wickedness. Could anything worse be imagined? No; it is impossible, for,

II. A punishment that is an unmixed evil, is certainly the greatest of all. Such a punishment is the blindness and obduracy of the habitual sinner. All other evils (call them what you will), are indeed the just punishments of sin; but if one only knows how to make the proper use of them, they are at the same time means of attaining eternal life more securely. Hence, they are rightly reckoned among the benefits and graces of God. They are evils which by their severity purify and cleanse our souls, make us enter into ourselves and see the vanity and deceitfulness of earthly things; they force us, as it were, to seek God; they are evils which serve to satisfy for our past sins, to help us to persevere in faith and good works, preserve us from fresh sin, and increase our merit and our glory in heaven; they are, in a word, evils that make us good and holy. The blindness of the soul, however, is a paramount evil. No profit or advantage can ever be reaped from it.

You have sinned, O man! You have even grievously and shamefully sinned. Nay, more, you have sinned continuously for years and years! But you feel remorse of conscience. You have neither pleasure by day nor repose by night. You continually hear a voice calling in your ear: "What hast thou done? Thou art an enemy of God, a slave of the devil, a child of damnation!" Certainly, as long as that lash is scourging you, you are suffering severely; but after all, be comforted and rejoice. All is not lost for you yet; the light of your soul is not yet altogether extinguished; God has not abandoned you; he is actually knocking at your door, and calling you back to his grace and friendship. Remorse of conscience, cruel as it is, can and will, if you are so minded, bring you back to penance, to God, to heaven. This is the testimony that St. Augustine, who was first a sink of vice, and afterwards a vessel of election, gives of himself "This very thing, my God," he says, "was for my good." It was this that saved me from the thralldom of the devil; namely, my conscience, which daily and hourly was fighting against thee and against myself. It was the bitter, but salutary scourge of conscience that forced me to return to thee. Learn then, that the gnawing worm of conscience is indeed a punishment; but it is a salutary one.

God may send the sinner other trials: sickness, misfortune, poverty, persecution, disgrace, the death of parents and dear friends. And yet, consolation can be found in all these trials and difficulties. Happy he who knows how to use them properly! Raising his mind to heaven, he can say: "Blessed be thou, my Lord and my God, who chastisest me with thy rod, as a loving father chastises his children! This sickness, poverty, misfortune, persecution, shame, abandonment, and loss which thou sendest me, is in thy merciful designs a school in which I can learn patience, an easy purgatory in which to atone for my sins, and a certain means of escaping hell and gaining heaven. I was before lazy and slothful in thy service, O my God; I have done little or nothing for thy honor and glory; now thou givest me an opportunity of doing something for thee, so that the punishment I suffer is a sanctifying one for me." Thus, in every evil and chastisement that is incurred by sin, there is something good and consoling which lessens the pain one has to suffer.

But in the blindness and obduracy of the soul there is no hope of amendment, no satisfaction, no merit. It is the one punishment God can inflict from which man can draw no profit. As the torments of the lost souls in hell can never satisfy God for their sins, but only hardens them the more, the more they suffer; so spiritual blindness daily increases the number of sins and vices, makes the heart more wicked, embitters more and more the divine anger, and adds every hour to the future pains of hell. Hence it is a certain sign of eternal reprobation. When an angry God commanded the prophet Isaias to renounce the Jewish people: "Blind the heart of this people, and make their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and be converted, and I heal them;" he did not say: Humble the intolerable pride of that people; strike them dead; destroy them utterly. No, for all that seemed too light a punishment, nay, no punishment at all, when compared to spiritual blindness. "Blind the heart of this people:" as if to say, this is the only punishment with which I can most severely avenge the insults offered me. War, pestilence, famine, and all other plagues are not enough for those rebels I will fill their souls with gloom and darkness, so that they may not understand or do any good. That is the terrible woe which the same angry God announces by the prophet Osee to obdurate sinners: "Woe to them when I shall depart from them."

That is the terrible woe from which the penitent David, with sighs and tears, begs to be delivered: “O Lord, rebuke me not in thy indignation, nor chastise me in thy wrath.” The death of my beloved child, the rebellion of my own son, the decimation of my people by pestilence, all this, O Lord, I accept with resignation. Yes, O merciful God, I kiss the fatherly hand that chastises me; I am ready to suffer still more punishments of the same kind; but one thing I beg of thee, “Rebuke me not in thy indignation.” Give me not over to my own desires, nor allow me to become blind and hardened in wickedness. Woe to the man whom God thus punishes in his anger!

O blind and obdurate sinners, listen to me now! Open your eyes, I beg of you! Give up sin, implore the grace of repentance. Be converted to God, and at *once!* Do not wait till tomorrow; for tomorrow, your case will be still more desperate! Alas! My words are in vain! These sinners have neither hearing, sight, nor understanding. They can indeed do penance and amend, for that is never impossible; but they will never do it, because they will never wish to do it. “Let them alone,” said Christ to his disciples of the hardened Pharisees, “they are blind.” O merciful Lord, must we let them alone? And what will become of them? They will be lost forever. Must we, then, look on while they are rushing down to hell, and not stretch out a hand to save them? Yes, let them alone. Let them go to their destruction, because they are blind. Take no further trouble concerning them; any labor spent in trying to convert them is fruitless; they are blind. “Let them alone!” O fearful words! O words that are not words, but rather hail-storms and thunderbolts! Let hardened sinners alone! Is there, then, no more hope of their conversion? Are they rejected by God and condemned to hell? Then all I can do is to say to them, Alas! I pity you; I pity your miserable state, your precious souls; and, unless a miracle of grace is worked to restore you your spiritual eye-sight, I pity you on account of the unhappy eternity that awaits you!

Finally, I have a word to say to you. Not one of you, I hope, is in that miserable state of blindness; and this sermon aims only to be a salutary warning to deter you from ever falling into it. Ah, may God keep you and me from it! “Walk whilst you have the light.” Now, whilst your eyes are open, walk carefully in the exact observance of the divine commands; work out your salvation in fear, humility, and child-like love of God; hate and avoid sin alone above all things, as far as you can. Above all, never form a habit of sinning, for that is the next step to obduracy. If you are already (which God forbid!) habitual sinners, trammelled by an inordinate love of any creature, oh, then, at once make a heroic resolution, and by speedy penance free yourselves from that state, “that the darkness overtake you not.” Have you done penance already? Then keep to it, and see that you never commit another mortal sin. Perhaps the next sin you commit may be the one which will so excite the anger and indignation of God, that according to his inscrutable and at the same time most just decrees, he will withdraw his light from you, and leave you in blindness, a prey to your own desires. Say to yourselves every morning and evening: How many sins have I not committed during my life? Is it not time for me to leave off sinning now? Ah, detest your past sins and repent with your whole heart of having ever offended God. How many there are who, although their sins are less numerous than yours, are now in a state of blindness, or are actually in hell! I thank God that he has allowed your conscience to torment you, and has not withdrawn his light from you. Sin no more, that, after this life, you may come to the full enjoyment of felicity in a happy eternity. Amen.

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