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Today if you shall hear His voice
Harden not your hearts.



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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

EASTER SUNDAY

The Stone at the Door of the Sepulcher

“Who shall roll us back the stone from the door of the sepulcher?” Mark 16:3.

The greater the desire of these holy women was to behold and anoint their dear Lord, the greater was their anxiety lest they should not be able to carry out their intention; for the entrance to the grave was closed by a huge stone; and therefore, they asked each other: Who shall roll us back the stone from the door of the sepulcher? Poor weak women (that they were), they had not the strength to do it; nevertheless, they went on their way, determined to do their best.

In like manner, sinners are deterred from doing sincere penance, and being really reconciled to God. I say *sincere* penance, and *real* reconciliation; for the great mass of the ordinary annual confessions, enforced on bad Catholics at Easter, are mere shams and sacrileges. Most of such sinners are shut up in the grave of sin by a huge stone which they fear even to attempt to roll away. The inveterate habit of a certain vice, some unlawful intimacy, or proximate occasion of sin, which they do not wish to abandon this is the stone that lies across the door of their hearts and which they think it impossible to remove. “Who” (they irresolutely ask), “who shall roll us back the stone?” Who will free me at last from this occasion, this intimacy, this inveterate habit? Sinners! (I reply) God helps those who help themselves. But he wishes you to learn now by my lips:

I. That the stone of a bad habit must be at once removed from the heart; and

li. That the longer the sinner delays, his difficulty becomes the greater; and, at length, utterly impossible.

I. When Lot tried to persuade his two sons-in-law to leave the doomed city, Sodom: “Arise,” he said to them, “get you out of this place, because the Lord will destroy this city. And he seemed to them to speak as it were in jest” (Gen. 19:14). So hard did they find it to leave the city in which they had been born and brought up. Ah! Far more readily would I undertake to move a huge mass of stone, than to roll away by preaching the stone of sinful habits from the hearts of sinners. So tyrannical a thing is habit, so hard and difficult is it to leave all at once, that which for a long time has occupied our hearts and affections! Is it an easy thing for the proud man to

become all at once meek, modest, and humble? For the miser to deprive himself of his unlawful gains by making necessary restitution, by opening his heart and his hand to the poor? For the habitual profligate and libertine to resolve against giving way in the future to even a single willful impure thought, to promise to abandon forever the object of his sinful love? For the blasphemer at once to abandon cursing and swearing? For the drunkard and the gambler to lead temperate, sober lives, and to spend their time in serving God with diligence? For one whose heart has hitherto been filled with hatred, enmity, and secret ill-will, to change all at once, and consent to be sincerely reconciled to his enemy, and to love him as himself?

What reason had the Jews to weep and sigh for the flesh-pots of Egypt, since their enjoyment was earned only by hard labor under the merciless yoke of Pharaoh? They sighed for the bread of slavery at the very time when God was leading them toward the promised land, and was feeding them miraculously with the heaven-sent manna! Were they not very foolish thus to long for the coarse food of slavery? The Jews longed for the garlic of Egypt, although they had the manna, on account of the influence of habit. Such a tyrannical thing is habit. The prophet Jeremias cries out as it were, in despair: "If the Ethiopian can change his skin or the leopard his spots, you also may do well, when you had learned evil." Alas! Who will roll us back the stone? Who will remove that heavy weight from the hearts of sinners?

Shall I persuade you to lay aside your sinful habits, by incautiously representing to you at the very outset that you will have an almost insurmountable difficulty in doing so! Shall I imprudently make your hard and bitter task still harder, more bitter, yea, almost impossible? Shall I thus deprive you of all courage for repentance, and harden you still more in sin, by driving you to despair? No, O sinners! The very difficulty of repentance (a difficulty which your own experience makes patent to you) must serve me as my sole weapon for conquering your understanding, and convincing you that you must at once, without delay, use every effort, and spare neither labor nor trouble, to roll away this stone, that is, to amend and abandon your sinful habits. Tell me, do you intend to go to heaven or not? If the latter is the case, I have done with you. But you say: "God forbid! We certainly hope and desire to gain heaven, and to be eternally happy!" Very good! But answer me this question:

Do you think you can save your souls, with that heavy stone on your heart, shutting you up in the grave of your bad habits, sealing you fast in the state of sin? No, you say; we believe that no one who is in the state of mortal sin can go to heaven; he must first be converted, do penance, and amend his life. Do you think, then, that you will one day repent and amend? Certainly; some day or other we will return what we have unjustly acquired, leave the proximate occasion of sin, make peace with our enemies, and give up vice. Very well.

Tell me, when do you intend to carry this resolution of yours into effect? Not yet, you say; it is too difficult now. When, then? Some other time, in a year, or a few months perhaps. And do you believe that it will be easier for you to abandon your sinful habit and do penance in a few years or a few months, than it is now? This is the fearful trap by which the crafty tempter ensnares most sinners to eternal destruction. Well knowing that repentance is necessary for salvation, they fondly imagine that it will be easier for them to repent at some future time. But you may be quite certain that it will be far more difficult for you later on, than it is now. In the first place, this is clear enough when we consider the question as concerning the Almighty God. It is an article of faith, O sinner, that you cannot free yourself from sin by your own natural strength alone, that you can never hope to do so, unless impelled thereto by the grace of God. True, the good God never refuses to a contrite sinner in this life, the grace of conversion and repentance. But the grace that is called efficacious, that is, the grace that God foresees man will really co-operate with, he is not bound to give to any one, and he bestows it as a special act of goodness and beneficence on whomsoever, and at whatsoever time he pleases. Again, the more wicked a sinner is, the longer he continues in sin, and the deeper evil habits have become rooted in his heart, so also the greater and more powerful, and, so to speak, even miraculous, must be the grace which will enable him to be truly converted. Our divine Lord, as St. Augustine remarks regarding the three people whom he raised from the dead, merely said to the lifeless daughter of Jairus: "Damsel, arise." While, as to the young man of Naim, who was being carried to the grave: "He came near and touched the bier." He made use of more seeming effort when he commanded him: "Young man, I say to thee, arise." But what labor it cost him to raise Lazarus, whose body had already begun to decay in the grave! "He groaned in the spirit and troubled himself." And Jesus wept. "Jesus, therefore, again groaning in himself, cometh to the sepulcher." And when he had caused the stone to be taken away from the sepulcher, "Jesus, lifting up his eyes, said: Father, I give thee thanks that thou hast heard me." Finally, "He cried with a loud voice: Lazarus, come forth." What was the reason of the difference? Did it cost

Omnipotence more labor to raise one than the other from the dead? That cannot be. To will and to accomplish are one and the same thing with God. Christ wished to show by this difference in the three miracles, that it is far more difficult, that it requires a much more powerful grace, to convert one who has been buried a long time in the grave of evil habits, than one who has been only an occasional sinner.

Perhaps you imagine that this special, powerful, and extraordinary grace, that God is bound to give to no one, will be given to you, when in some years' time you wish to amend your evil ways? Have you ever heard of a grace of that kind being promised to any one, much less to yourself? But you say: Perhaps it will be given to me. And perhaps, indeed, in all probability, it will not. For, to look at the matter reasonably, do you think that your continuing to offend him is a likely way to induce the Almighty to bestow on you a special mark of his favor? Is it not as if you were saying to his very face: "O God, I do not want thy grace now. Some other time, it will be more convenient for me to accept it; thou canst help me in a few years, after I have caused thee still more displeasure; then thou canst give me grace, and a still more powerful grace!" Alas, poor wretch, that darest so presumptuously to dictate to the Almighty God, and to prescribe a mode of action to his goodness? Do you think that God will wait upon you, as if he were your servant, and that he will do whatever you tell him?

God may permit you to go on thus for awhile, he may bear with you most patiently for a time, but instead of giving you at last a special grace, he will deliver you up to your evil inclinations, and will allow you to become more and more entangled in the meshes of your sinful habits. Sin away then, if you are bent on doing so, but remember that the time will come when the sinner will wish to repent, and will not be able, because, when he might have repented, he refused to do so. It is one thing for that sinner to find mercy from God who falls through mere frailty, even a hundred times, and remains in the state of sin for a certain length of time, but far different is it for him who makes a habit of sinning, and willfully and obstinately perseveres in sin. The same God who forgave the Ninivites, because they at once did penance for their sins in sackcloth and ashes, destroyed the whole world by a deluge, because in those days men did not hearken to oft repeated exhortations to repent, and refused to abandon their sinful habits. If you find it hard to repent now, what will it be when the habit of sin has become inveterate? Therefore throw that heavy stone at once off your heart. "Today, if you shall hear his voice, harden not your hearts!" (Ps. 94:8.) Do it at once, today; do not wait even till tomorrow. The devil whose slave you are will increase the difficulty in conquering your bad habits.

II. Every sinner must know by experience, even if Holy Scripture said nothing about it, that he is a slave and servant of the devil. But perhaps you think that it is only a figurative slavery? If so, consider for a moment what you are and how you live. What strange, contradictory, and bewildering thoughts in your mind! What uneasiness and anxiety in your conscience! What startling changes and contradictions in your will! Do you not see that you are the slave of a remorseless tyrant, whom you must obey in all things, being compelled, so to speak, to dance to his piping? You experience an inward impulse to do some good work, for instance. To go to church, to hear a sermon, to remain away from that dangerous company, to say your prayers, to go to confession and Communion, etc. In spite of that inspiration, the devil, either by himself, or by his instruments, compels you, as it were, to go somewhere else, where you will commit a number of sins. You are thus not your own master, but the servant and slave of the devil. He can do with you what he pleases; if he tells you to curse and swear, to slander your neighbor, to seek revenge, to sin against holy purity, you obey at once, although you know that you are doing wrong, and are acting against God and your conscience, to your own great detriment. So completely are you a slave to the devil.

Tell me, how will you repent and amend your wicked ways when you have spent your youth in sinful pleasures, and have fully satisfied all your inordinate appetites? If the devil has such power over your will, after you have lived for a few months or years in sin, what power will he not have after you have spent many months and years in his service, adding daily sin to sin? If you cannot free yourself now from the ten or twelve cords with which he has bound you, how will you be able to escape when you are fettered in iron chains from head to foot? We read in the Gospel of St. Mark, that when the father of the young demoniac complained to Jesus that his disciples had failed to cast out the evil spirit, our Lord asked at once: "How long a time is it since this hath happened unto him?" And the father answered: "From his infancy." Why did Christ ask this question? Nothing to him is unknown. There is no doubt that he knew more about the matter than the young man's father did. He asked the question, that we may understand why the disciples could not drive out the devil. For it is as if Christ said: Since he has been possessed since childhood, it is no wonder that the evil spirit does not wish to leave him.

O sinner, if it is now difficult for a confessor or a preacher to drive out of your heart the demon who has taken possession of it by habitual sin, who will be able to expel that evil spirit after he has possessed you for several years longer? God alone can do it and that too, by a miracle of grace. But I am afraid there is little chance of his helping you, if you continue to despise him as you now do.

Pitiable was the lot of the Israelites before they were freed from the slavery of Egypt, for they were forced to labor hard, “and they built for Pharaoh cities of tabernacles.” O unhappy people, do you not know what you are doing? Can you not guess that you are building your own prison? If you desire liberty, why do you labor to defeat your desire? Every brick you lay renders your escape more difficult. Do you understand the figure, O sinners! Alas, much more pitiable is your sad state! The devil urges sinners to add sin to sin, that they may surround themselves with a wall, which will imprison them perpetually. How the devil must laugh at your labor and at your intention of doing penance after you have committed still more sin! You are like a bird ensnared in the nets of the fowler that entangles itself still more by its futile efforts to get free, to the great amusement of its captor.

But supposing even that the devil were to leave you in peace, and place no obstacle in the way of your conversion, and that God were to bestow on you a powerful grace; even then, there would be a greater difficulty on the part of your own will to co-operate with grace, a more determined opposition to the call to repentance. The grace of God is not enough for a sincere conversion. You, O sinner, must co-operate with it. You must efficaciously and sovereignly hate all sin; you must firmly purpose never to consent, even in mere desire, to a mortal sin; firmly purpose to avoid carefully all dangerous occasions of sin. Without these dispositions, your repentance is worth nothing. What think you now? Will not your conversion be far more difficult, when long delay has fed and inflamed to the highest degree your inordinate love of sinful pleasures? When an aversion for good works has taken deeper root in your heart?

In Holy Scripture sin is compared to a weight or burden, to a bandage, to a cord, to an illness, and to a skin. It is a *weight* oppressing the overburdened soul, so that it cannot raise itself to heavenly and supernatural things. A child groans under a burden it can scarcely lift. If you increase the load by twenty, thirty, or a hundred pounds, will it become easier to carry? Every sin is a *bandage*, blindfolding the eyes of the understanding, so that it can hardly discern good from evil. Tie on several bandages you will not be able to see at all. Sin is a *cord* that draws the will away from good and binds it fast to evil; double that cord, and you make your will a complete prisoner. St. Augustine testifies to this in relating the history of his conversion “I was sighing in bondage, being kept therein not by another, but by my own iron will.” Sin is a *malady* of the soul. A fresh wound can be easily cured; but when it gets old, no medicine can do it any good. The habit of sin is like a *skin*. There are some who put on the habit of sinning, not like a garment that may be taken off, but like their own skin, which can hardly be removed. A young and tender skin is so sensitive that it cannot bear the prick of a needle, but the skin that has become hardened and callous by work can bear even burning coals. Hence, the sinner calmly reposes in his wickedness, he is quite satisfied with his condition, and has no desire to change it; nay, sin becomes to him a second nature, a necessity, for when a habit is not resisted, it becomes a necessity.

Consider this matter, O sinner, in a reasonable light. You cannot extinguish your desire now, although it is as yet but a spark; how will you be able to conquer it when it has become a great fire? You have a difficulty now in breaking a thread; how will you hereafter tear asunder a strong cable? The nail, as yet, has been struck by the hammer only two or three times, and you cannot pull it out without trouble; how will you be able to extract it when it has been driven into the head by repeated blows? Your wound is still fresh, but it is hard to heal; how will you heal it when it has become putrid and cancerous? In a word, if it is so difficult for you now to overcome your bad habits and do penance, what will it be hereafter, when the skin shall have grown hard and callous?

Listen to the terrible threat Christ himself launches forth against you! “You shall seek me, and shall not find me” (John 7:34); you shall die in your sins (John 8:21); a threat that is to be understood particularly of the habit of sin. Our habitual sins are truly *our* sins; they are ours as to their malice, which comes from our perverse wills; ours as to the guilt and punishment they deserve, which guilt remains in us until we do penance. The sins, however, which we commit now and then through frailty, or when overcome by a violent temptation, are, properly speaking, not our sins as far as our inclinations and desires are concerned: for we repent of them easily,

and soon throw them off our conscience. In *your* sins then, O unhappy wretches, in your bad habits, which you refuse to amend, you will die, and go down to eternal death.

Therefore I repeat, if you are in earnest about amending your lives, if you are in earnest about going to heaven, delay no longer! Do not wait till your salvation becomes almost impossible. Like St. Augustine make an earnest resolution to repent at once. He found it just as hard as you do to roll away the heavy stone from his heart, and he was always deferring his conversion from day to day. At last, he said to himself: "How long shall I keep on saying tomorrow, tomorrow? Why not at once? Why should not this hour be the last of my disgrace?" Do you also say: This hour I will give up sin, do penance for all my past sins, and with the grace of God, I will sin no more and rise with Christ to a new life. Amen.

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