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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 + + +

VOL. 2 = The Penitent Christian

FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

The Uselessness of Prayer and Sacrifice without Reconciliation

“Go first to be reconciled to thy brother, and then coming thou shalt offer thy gift.” St. Matthew 5:24.

If God rejects the offering made him by one who is not at peace with his neighbor, telling him in the words of Christ: “Go first to be reconciled to thy brother, and then coming, thou shalt offer thy gift,” how much less will God look with favor on the offering of one who is at enmity with him? We often come to the church to present our gifts to God. We offer him a gift of infinite value in the holy sacrifice of the Mass; we offer him the gift of our lips by fervent prayer, when we lay our wants before him in order to implore his help; but how are our hearts disposed meanwhile? Are we always at peace with our neighbor? Nay, have we really been reconciled to God by true penance and the amendment of our lives? If we do not make our peace with God, our prayers and offerings are not acceptable. For,

I. To pray and offer sacrifice and not to amend one's sinful ways is not a prayer that can move an angry God to mercy:

II. Such prayers and sacrifices only render the divine anger more bitter.

I. The qualities required by God for an efficacious prayer are humility, fervor, and confidence. God wishes us to pray to him, humbly acknowledging that he alone is the Lord of all, in whose hands are sickness or health, prosperity or adversity, our life and death; that it is he alone whom we have to thank for graces and blessings; he alone whom we have to fear and to adore as the Author of the temporal crosses and trials we have to bear. Time brazen sky, which appears so merciless! The dried up earth, which becomes as hard as iron, cry out to us: Blame not our sterility, poor mortals! neither trust to your own skill or diligence. Rely solely on the all-ruling God, on whose fatherly Providence and all-wise decrees alone everything depends. Him alone you should seek; him alone you should keep as your Friend. There is no Catholic who does not acknowledge that it is God who rules the wind and weather, the rain and sunshine, and who commands them according to his good will and pleasure. That it is God alone who can cause the fruits of the earth to spring up; but, since we are accustomed to receive those benefits every year, we do not appreciate those wonderful works of the almighty power as we should, and we take them as matters of course, so that we do not give ourselves much trouble to beg of him to bestow them on us. And if we pray, how do we pray, brethren? Is it not a shameless thing for a wretched mortal, who knows that he has grievously offended God, to dare to ask him for help in pressing necessities, without humbling

himself and imploring pardon and remission of his sins, or to present to him a petition for relief, having at the same time the intention of continuing to offend him by enmities with his neighbor?

He who prays and does not intend to do penance or to amend his life cannot be in earnest, much less fervent in his prayer. How can you expect God to hear you, when you refuse to hear him calling on you to return to him? How can your prayer come from the heart, when you merely move your lips and keep your heart obstinately closed? when your lips cry to heaven, but your heart remains hardened in wickedness? No, all your prostrations and genuflections, all your fasting and church-going, all your praying and singing, are only a sham. You are like a wolf; the wolf may roar, the wolf may tremble, but he still remains a wolf. Sinner, when danger threatens you, you begin to tremble and for a short time to keep a restraint on yourself; you go to church with every appearance of humility; you pray and sigh; but why? The shepherd has appeared and threatened you; an angry God menaces you with sickness or some other evil; but you may tremble and speak to him fair as much as you will; you are the same old wolf; you have no intention of giving up for good your wicked life; you are not in earnest with your sighing and praying; you have no desire to pardon your enemy, to abandon your revenge. And if we do not intend to quit our wicked ways, we cannot have that confidence without which our prayer is worth nothing. "Dearly beloved," says St. John, "if our hearts do not reprehend us, we have confidence towards God: and whatsoever we shall ask, we shall receive of him; because we keep his commandments, and do those things which are pleasing in his sight" (John 3:21, 22). David, after he had repented of his sins and was assured of pardon by Nathan, used to cry out to heaven with the greatest confidence when his enemies were persecuting him: "In thee, O Lord, have I hoped, let me never be confounded. Bow down thy ear to me, make haste to deliver me" (Ps. 30:2, 3). The Prodigal in the Gospel, when he reflected on his miserable state, and was thereby brought to see his wickedness and bewail it, conceived a firm hope and confidence that he would not be turned away from his father's house, but would again be received into favor. "I will arise and will go to my father, and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee: I am not now worthy to be called thy son" (St. Luke 15:18, 19). And they both had reason to speak like that, for they repented of their sins and detested them. But if I am still in the state of sin, still unreconciled to my enemy, how can I say to God: In thee, O Lord, have I hoped, let me not be confounded, nor abandon me in my present necessity? On what can I base my confidence? On the divine promises? Ah, my bad conscience at once suggests to me the words of the blind man in the Gospel: "Now we know that God doth not hear sinners" (John 9:3). On the divine goodness and mercy, because he is still my heavenly Father? But how do I dare to call him by the sweet name of Father? My bad conscience tells me, you are the sworn enemy of God! you are the object of his hatred and malediction! you do not belong to the number of his children, but to the children of the devil, who still holds you in bondage. The emperor Caracalla, wishing to have undisputed sway, murdered his own brother Geta in the very lap of his mother. Suppose now, that the murderer, with his hands reeking with the blood of his victim, were to present himself before his mother, who is still lamenting the loss of her child, and to beg a great favor from her, do you think he would be likely to receive it? No, nor do you even imagine that he would have the audacity to present a request at such a time. And yet, if I am in the state of sin, I should be guilty of still greater presumption, if, with my hands still reeking with the Blood of the Son of God, whom I crucify and murder anew by my sins of enmity and revenge, I were to present myself before the throne of God to beg relief in my necessities, knowing well as I do what the Lord says to all sinners: "When you stretch forth your hands, I will turn away my eyes from you; and when you multiply prayer, I will not hear; for your hands are full of blood" (Isai. 1:15). Alas, while I am in such a state I dare not even raise my eyes to heaven. How, then, can I pray with confidence to God and ask his help and protection? How can I, with confidence, beg of God to do what I will, when I am not disposed to do what he wills me to do? No. Such prayer "is not a word that may draw down mercy, but rather that may stir up wrath, and enkindle indignation." (Judith 8:72). And so it is in reality; for prayer without the Intention of amendment,

II. Only renders the divine anger still more bitter.

Must, then, the sinner give up prayer altogether? Is it not surely better to remain silent than to excite the anger of God? No, such is not my meaning. He who is in sin should pray all the more humbly, frequently, and fervently. But, first of all, he should pray for the grace of repentance and conversion, and be reconciled to his

enemy; for, if he does not wish to do so, it would be far better for him humbly to submit to the divine chastisements, acknowledging that he has richly deserved them, than dare to try to avert those chastisements by his prayer. What do you think of a sick man, whom a skilful doctor has promised to cure, yet who cries and shrieks out at the top of his voice that he will have none of the medicines prescribed, actually repelling the doctor with hand and foot? Is such conduct likely to win the doctor's esteem? No; in place of helping the sick man, he will be apt to go away in disgust and leave him to perish in his obstinacy. Would not any of us do the same, if we had to deal with such a case?

Now, how do we act? God, like a loving and well-meaning father, threatens us with the rod in his hand. "Will you amend your lives?" he asks. "Will you avoid sin in future?" And we answer sulkily: "No, we will not amend; we shall continue our usual mode of life." "Then," says the Almighty, "you must feel the weight of my hand, which will force you to amend." Still we cry out and struggle against the punishment; we reject the wholesome medicine; we try to snatch the rod out of the hands of our heavenly father. Is it not as if we said to God: O God, thou wilt restore us to health by this salutary, though bitter medicine; but away with thy medicine; we want none of it! Thou hast seized the rod, like a well-meaning father, to warn and exhort us to amend our sinful lives; but we do not wish to amend; take thy rod away, we do not wish to be warned, nor exhorted, nor chastised, nor forced to amend. We do not want to be brought to see our state; we will remain as we are, in our pride and vanity, in our impurity and dissolute mode of life, in our idleness and intemperance, in our anger and enmities. Now, can such prayers move a fatherly heart to pity and mercy? Do they not excite still more the just anger of God, and compel him to inflict a more grievous chastisement on his obstinate children?

Let us, then, Christians, cease wondering and complaining if heaven seems hard and merciless to us. God is not wanting either in the power or in the will to help us: "The hand of the Lord is not shortened, that it cannot save, neither is his ear heavy, that it cannot hear" (Isai. 59:1). "Your iniquities have divided between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you, that he should not hear" (Isai. 59:2), such is the answer your own conscience will give you, if you ask it why God takes the rod in his hand now. And it will tell you, too, not that God closes his ear to your prayers, but that he is a just and at the same time a merciful Father, even when he punishes you because you close your ears to his repeated invitations. Therefore we ourselves are to blame for any misfortune that happens to us, because we turn the mildness of our Lord into bitterness, and compel him to be severe against his will.

I conclude with the words of my text: "If, therefore, thou offer thy gift at the altar, and there remember that thy brother hath anything against thee, leave there thy offering before the altar, and go first to be reconciled to thy brother, and then coming, thou shalt offer thy gift." Be at peace with your neighbor if you wish God to be at peace with you. Forgive, if you would be forgiven.

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