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No Sorrow Means No Forgiveness

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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 + + +

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THIRTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

The Necessity and Nature of Sorrow for Sin

“Go, show yourselves to the priests.” St. Luke 17,14.

There is no other means to cleanse your souls from the leprosy of mortal sin, and receive forgiveness from the God whom you have offended, but to “show yourselves to the priests,” to examine your consciences with candor, and to confess your sins fully. But wait a little. The examination of conscience and confession of one’s sins are, after all, not enough. Today I shall show you

- I. *That the most necessary part of the Sacrament of Penance is true sorrow for sin; and I shall explain to you*
- II. *In what this sorrow consists.*

I. Even little children learning the Catechism, know that the chief part of the Sacrament of Penance is sorrow for sin. God is the Lord of all graces, which he distributes as he pleases. Now, he has determined not to forgive sins, under any circumstances, unless the sinner is truly sorry for them. This is the price for which God is willing to give us pardon. And that, too, with perfect justice; for “mortal sin is a turning away from the Creator, and a turning towards creatures.” Man, of his own free will, abandons God, whose grace and friendship he despises, and, for the sake of some brutal lust, or temporal gain, or vain honor, attaches his heart to creatures. This is what the Lord complains of: “Thus saith the Lord: What iniquity have your fathers found in me, that they are gone far from me, and have walked after vanity?... They have turned their backs on me and not their face” (Jerem. 2:5, 27). Therefore, in order to be freed from sin and to recover the grace and friendship of God, the sinner by an act of his free will, must abandon creatures and turn towards his Creator.

1. And what less could God require as an atonement for the insult offered him, than that he by whom he has been offended and abandoned should at least feel grieved and sorry for his crime? It is, then, an undoubted fact that God will not pardon sin, either in or out of the Sacrament of Penance, unless the sinner is sorry for what he has done.

2. Sorrow for sin, when it arises from a perfect love of God, is such a powerful means of obtaining forgiveness that it at once justifies the sinner, even without any other means, and makes him a friend of God. In the Old Testament, this perfect sorrow was the only means of obtaining pardon for one who had sinned mortally. In the New Law, if I have no opportunity of confession, through want of a priest, if I make an act of perfect contrition, I am again a friend of God, even if I were the greatest sinner in the world, and the kingdom of heaven belongs to me as my lawful inheritance. Nor is any examen of conscience or of the number and nature of my sins required for this. It is enough if I am heartily sorry, from a motive of perfect charity, for having offended God. Even when I have an opportunity of confessing my sins, and intend availing myself of it, the

moment I make this act of perfect sorrow, before I receive absolution, or tell my sins to the priest, or even examine my conscience, all my sins are at once forgiven, although the obligation of confessing those sins and receiving sacramental absolution for them, still remains, because the law of God requires it. From this alone it is evident that contrition is the most necessary condition to ensure forgiveness for sin; for, if all other means fail, it alone has the power of fully reconciling us to God.

3. The same necessity is still more evident from the fact that without this sorrow all other means are useless to obtain pardon of sin. You may have spent a whole year in examining your conscience, and searching out its most hidden recesses, and writing out all your sins with their number, nature, and circumstances; you may have confessed all those sins with the greatest candor and humility, and with great shame and mortification on your part, to a most learned, experienced, and pious priest. He may have given you sacramental absolution and all imaginable indulgences as well, that it is in his power to give. You may have performed your penance, and done other voluntary penitential works besides. **But if true sorrow alone is wanting, then all your labor is vain. Not one of your sins is forgiven;** you are not absolved from them; you are, as you were before, a child of reprobation, an object of the divine malediction. Even the Baptism of water, although it has the power of cleansing the soul from all stain of sin, and all punishment due to sin (so that, if one died immediately after having properly received it, he would go at once to heaven), even that cannot help an adult who has sinned grievously to obtain forgiveness, unless he first hates and detests his sins by an act of at least imperfect sorrow. Such is the teaching of the Council of Trent. Therefore neither examen of conscience, nor confession, nor absolution, nor satisfaction, nor penance, nor holy Baptism itself in the case of an adult, nor all the other means that God has appointed for the forgiveness of sin are of the least use, if true sorrow for sin be wanting.

4. Its indispensable necessity for the sinner is evident from the fact that there is nothing which can replace it or do its work. If, through inexperience, or inculpable ignorance, one has not properly examined his conscience, so that he has forgotten many grievous sins, provided he has otherwise done his best according to his ability, his sins will nevertheless be forgiven; for the goodness of God will take his inexperience and ignorance into consideration, and will make good his defects. Again, if through the same causes he has not confessed all his sins, without any fault on his part, provided he has otherwise done his best to prepare for confession, his sins will be forgiven him, the absolution he receives will be valid; for his ignorance excuses him, and he is bound to nothing further than to confess those sins the next time he goes to confession, if he remembers them. If he has not received absolution validly, either because the priest is not properly authorized, or because the priest, through wickedness, has not had the proper intention when giving absolution, nevertheless, if he has a perfect sorrow for his sins, God himself will absolve him; or else, if his sorrow is imperfect, he can be absolved by another priest, the next time he goes to confession. If he has unwillingly forgotten his penance, or has not been able to perform it, he is no worse for that. The guilt of sin is taken away from his soul; for his incapacity excuses him. Nay, if through weakness or illness, one cannot examine his conscience, nor declare his sins in confession, nor fulfill the penance enjoined him, provided he has the will to confess, even by signs, and has at the same time a true sorrow for sin, he can receive absolution, and his sins will be forgiven. Thus, all these parts of the Sacrament of Penance may be supplied in some way or other, if in certain circumstances any of them be wanting.

But with regard to sorrow for sin the matter is quite different. It is so absolutely necessary, that without it, not a single sin will be forgiven. If one who has committed a mortal sin is so simple as to believe that it is enough for him to declare his sins in confession, even if he has never heard anything of sorrow for sin, and knows not how to excite it, his inculpable ignorance does not excuse him. He is in the state of sin, and he remains in it. Another would willingly make an act of sorrow, but he cannot, on account of weakness and inability. His illness does not excuse him, and if he dies without that sorrow, although he may have received a thousand absolutions, he will be lost forever, and there is no help for him. **Thus there is neither inexperience, nor ignorance, nor weakness, nor illness, nor indulgence, nor jubilee, nor priestly absolution, nor anything in the world that can dispense me from having true sorrow for my sins, or replace it, if it is wanting.** If I have offended God by mortal sin, and die without truly repenting of it, whether willfully, or through inculpable ignorance, or through some cause that I could not prevent, I am lost forever, not, indeed, on account of not having true sorrow for my sin, but on account of the sin I have committed and have not annulled by true repentance (unless I make an act of perfect charity, for that includes a perfect sorrow for sin, and therefore is able to justify the sinner even outside

the Sacrament of Penance). In the same way, a child who dies without being baptized before it comes to the use of reason cannot go to heaven, even if an attempt were ignorantly made to administer Baptism with white wine instead of water. The necessary Baptism being wanting, the child cannot have any share in the happiness of heaven.

From this we can conclude that our greatest care and diligence, when going to confession, should be devoted to exciting in ourselves a true sorrow and repentance for sin, even when we have nothing but venial sins and daily shortcomings to accuse ourselves of. If we have not a mortal sin on our conscience, it would be better for us to go to Holy Communion without confession, than to confess without true sorrow. For, as I have often said already, I am never bound to confess venial sins; but if, nevertheless, I wish to confess them (and it is a good and useful thing to do) and have nothing else but venial sins, then I must necessarily make an act of true sorrow for all, or for one at least, otherwise I profane the holy Sacrament, and the absolution I receive is invalid, on account of the want of one of the necessary parts of the Sacrament. Hence it may be that of two persons who go to confession one may come out justified, although his conscience was burdened with a hundred mortal sins, because he has prepared properly for confession and has had a true sorrow for his sins; while the other, who was before pious and just, and had only venial sins to confess, comes out in the state of mortal sin, because he was wanting in true contrition, through his own fault. Therefore, I repeat, that they who go frequently to confession and have nothing to accuse themselves of but venial sins and daily faults would do well to confess in general terms some sin of their past lives, for which they can easily make an act of contrition, so as not to expose the Sacrament to the danger of being invalidly received.

But alas, that true sorrow and repentance for sin, which is most requisite for the forgiveness of sin, is also unfortunately that in which most penitents are wanting! How many there are who imagine that, when they have examined their consciences accurately, and declared all their sins in confession, they have done quite enough? They have not the least doubt that their confessions are good. They hardly think of having the proper sorrow for sin, their only anxiety being not to leave out anything in confession. Again, you will find hundreds who are anxious and troubled after confession; and why? Ah, they think, have I left out anything? I wish I could be certain that I have told all my sins. But amongst the hundreds, you will hardly find one who will be scrupulous as to whether he has had the proper sorrow for sin.

I will say nothing of those Christians whose mode of life sufficiently declares that they do not believe in the necessity of sorrow for sin, and who think that all they have to do is to tell their sins to the priest in order to be forgiven. For when they are assailed by temptation, and the opportunity is offered them, they fall into sin head foremost, without scruple or fear, and then say to others, or at least think to themselves: "After all, what harm is there in what I have done? I can tell it in confession, and it will be all right." Yes, I readily believe that, if confession alone were required, one who has little fear of God might be more daring in offending him. But confession is not enough; you must also detest your sins more than all other imaginable evils. Do you believe that? If you do, is it not a foolish thing for you to think or say: "I will satisfy my passion now; I will say or do this sinful thing, and then I can confess it afterwards"? That is just as senseless as if I were to say: "There are many clever surgeons in this town who can heal all kinds of wounds I will therefore throw myself down from the top of a high wall, and break my limbs to pieces; I shall be sorry for having done so afterwards, but I can go to one of those doctors and he will cure me!" The fact is, you do not believe in the necessity of true contrition for your sins, which you commit so freely; or else you do not understand what is meant by this contrition, so that, if you always confess in that way, you will never have a true sorrow and repentance. For my part, out of a hundred bad confessions, I believe that ninety-nine are bad through want of true sorrow.

II. *The nature of true contrition.*

"Contrition," says the Council of Trent, "is the sorrow of the mind which detests its sins and aspires to a better life." Hence, true contrition does not consist in the words that are spoken by the mouth, or read out of a prayer-book, no matter how earnest or expressive they may be; nor does it consist in sighs or tears, nor in the sadness that is experienced in the sensitive part of the soul. These outward manifestations of grief are good and praiseworthy; they are sometimes the effect of a supernatural sorrow. Real contrition does not consist in them, nor are they always infallible signs of it; otherwise, the wicked king Antiochus, the traitor Judas, and others like

them, would have had true sorrow for their sins, for they wept on account of them; nor would the penitent David have had true sorrow when he said, "I have sinned against the Lord" (2 Kings 12:13), in which passage we do not read of his having shed tears, and yet he was immediately assured, in the name of God, by the prophet Nathan, that his sins were forgiven. Those people are greatly mistaken who make sensible efforts to force out tears and sighs, to the great detriment of their health; and if they succeed in doing so, imagine they have true contrition. Others think they have not true sorrow because they do not feel a palpitation of the heart, or some other sign of bodily excitement, or because they do not experience as bitter or as sensible a sorrow as they would feel at the death of their parents, children, or friends.

Understand this, dear Christians, sorrow for sin is not a natural and sensible affection of the sensitive part of our nature, but a supernatural, spiritual affection of the reasoning soul; and it consists partly in a movement of sorrow in the understanding, and partly in an earnest retraction and condemnation in the will. In the first place, when the sinner's conscience represents his sins to his memory, and he, enlightened by faith, has thought of what a great, almighty, all-seeing God, worthy of all love, he has despised, and of what a loving Father and sovereign Benefactor he has offended; of how he has inflicted eternal death on his own precious soul for the sake of some miserable, momentary pleasure, and sacrificed heaven and everything that is good, exposing himself to the danger of being buried in hell forever, then his understanding is enabled to see, to his secret confusion, that he has indeed acted wrongly and foolishly. Am I not, he thinks to himself, foolish, presumptuous, ungrateful, and wicked, to have committed sin? This knowledge and sorrow on the part of the understanding are followed by a resolution and repentance on the part of the will, by which he hates, condemns, and, as it were, retracts the evil he knows he has done, and wishes heartily he had never done it. Ah, he says to himself in all sincerity, would that I had never done it! If it were to be done again, I would rather die a thousand times than be guilty of it! **Now, if this sorrow of his arises from the fact that he is grieved at having offended and insulted God, whom he now loves above all things on account of his infinite perfections, then it is perfect contrition, and can blot out sin even outside the Sacrament of Penance.** But if it is caused by his grief at having offended God, who has been so good to him, or who can shut heaven against him, or condemn him to hell, then it is an imperfect contrition, which is sufficient to obtain forgiveness of sin in the Sacrament of Penance. You see now, that all this is not necessarily an affection of the senses or of the body, nor a matter of words or printed forms, but that it resides in the mind and in the soul. Nor does it need to be entertained a long time. If it be sincerely entertained in the heart even for a moment, it suffices to obtain the forgiveness of sin. I say that it must be sincerely entertained. **My sorrow for sin must be so sincere that I must be disposed, no matter what circumstances arise, to prefer any evil rather than offend God by mortal sin.**

Christians, have we always that earnest resolve when we are exciting ourselves to sorrow for sin before confession? Have you got it, who recite a whole catalogue of mortal sins in confession, and then repeat by heart the formula: "I am sorry for all these sins, because I have thereby offended God," while you hardly bestow a thought on the meaning of those words? The same I say to you who come to confession with a great number of mortal sins, and never show any signs of amendment from one confession to another. And to you also, who continue in the proximate occasion of sin, in impure intimacy, in hatred and enmity, in drunkenness, in the filthy habit of cursing and swearing, in following the unlawful customs of the world, and in the possession of ill gotten goods. Are you all firmly resolved to detest your sins above every other evil? Do you seriously wish you had never committed them? How is that possible? Your sorrow is only a lip-sorrow; it does not touch the heart, and therefore it is only an apparent, invalid, and sacrilegious sorrow, which adds to your sins instead of taking them away. I repeat what I have said already, out of a hundred bad confessions, ninety-nine (generally speaking), are invalid through a defect of true sorrow. Amen.

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