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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

NINETEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

The Manner of Confession

“But he was silent.” Matt. 22:12

When we offend God by mortal sin, we lose the wedding-garment of sanctifying grace, and are doomed to eternal darkness; but we have an easy and advantageous means of regaining our lost cause, namely, the holy Sacrament of Penance. How comes it, then, that countless numbers of sinners still remain in their unhappy state? Alas! They act like the unhappy man in today’s Gospel “He was silent.” They refuse to confess their sins, or they do not confess them in the proper manner. Learn then, my brethren, that one should make his confession,

I. Humbly; and

II. Candidly.

I. There is no virtue which so wins the favor of God, as humility. Humility is the measure by which he distributes his graces and favors; for, as St. Peter says: “God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble” (Pet. 5:5). “He hath regarded the humility of his handmaid,” says the Queen of heaven in her Magnificat. Great as she was, without humility, even she would not have pleased God. If God then requires, even from his Mother and his dearest friends, that they should humble themselves, in order to retain his friendship and receive further graces from him, how much more will he insist on his enemies humbling themselves, if they wish to regain his grace and favor? Who are you, sinner, when you come to confession? You are a beggar about to implore the greatest of favors from an infinitely great and almighty Lord, who has not the least need of you, and who is at the same time exceedingly wrath with you. You are a traitor guilty of high-treason, and suing the divine Majesty for pardon. You are a debtor without a single farthing, imprisoned until now, and about to humbly beg the remission of your debt. You are a poor sinner convinced of your evil ways, and deserving condign punishment, who now appear before your angry Judge to implore his mercy, and the revocation of the terrible sentence pronounced against you. O, with what deep interior and exterior humility you should approach the sacred tribunal! When you go to confession, do not imagine that you have to deal with the priest alone. There is another invisible confessor abiding in him, Jesus Christ, whom the eternal Father has made Judge of all creatures. He it is who hears your accusation in order to absolve you from your sins. He raises his hand with the priest, and utters by the lips of the priest the words of absolution. He shares with you the infinite merits of his precious Blood and of the death he suffered for you, to satisfy for and to blot out your sins; and he it is, who receives you again into his grace and friendship. Is it not right, then, that you should appear before such a Judge with the greatest modesty, humility, and lowliness? Although you may be a learned, rich, or great man in the eyes of the world, you are not deserving of any special consideration on that account in the confessional. You

must, so to speak, strip yourself of your personality, and lay it aside, before entering that sacred tribunal, wherein lord and peasant, beggar and king, are on the same footing, all appearing as poor sinners, doomed to eternal death, humbly approaching their Judge in order to beg for mercy.

How did the Ninivites do penance? "They put on sackcloth from the greatest to the least" (Jonas 3:5). There was no distinction then between the lady and her maid, the master and his servant, the king and the lowest of his scullions. All alike assumed the character of penitents, that is, of men who humbled themselves. "And God saw their works, that they were turned from their evil way; and God had mercy with regard to the evil which he had said that he would do them, and he did it not" (Ibid. 10). Thus also king Achab averted a threatened destruction. "He rent his garments, and put hair-cloth upon his flesh, and fasted, and slept in sack-cloth, and walked with his head cast down" (3 Kings 21:27). And God said of him: "Because he hath humbled himself for my sake, I will not bring the evil in his days" (Ibid. 29). The publican, crouching in shame and sorrow in an obscure corner of the temple, goes down to his house justified, while the proud Pharisee, flaunting his good works in the front, is rejected by the Most High. "A contrite and humble heart, O God, thou wilt not despise" (Ps. 1:19), says the penitent David.

When you appear in the confessional, you must be humble of heart, acknowledging yourself worthy of hell fire and undeserving of pardon; humble of speech, declaring your sins with a holy fear, and with modest and respectful words; and humble of manner, showing by downcast eyes, bended knees, and folded hands, that you are before the Judge of the living and the dead, awaiting your sentence.

But are they humble penitents who come to confession dressed in the height of the fashion, and in a vain, and sometimes, a scandalous style, actually giving occasion of sin to others, while they are accusing themselves of their own sins? If a stranger, a non-Catholic, (seeing them there), were to ask: "Who are those people and what are they doing?" could I reply: "They are poor sinners, humbly begging pardon of God whom they have offended"? "Sinners"? "Beggars"? he would have every reason to exclaim with a laugh: "Truly they look like it! Are they not rather vain, frivolous creatures who come hither to be admired, and to attract the attention of others?"

And if he were to ask further: "Who are these that, while they wait their turn to enter the confessional, are looking around, laughing, and talking with each other?" "They too, I reply, are poor sinners waiting to appear before their Judge, in order to accuse themselves, and humbly ask for forgiveness." "Eh?" he would say, "but that is a strange way for them to act! They do not appear to care much for their angry Judge. It seems to matter little to them whether they are forgiven or not!" And he is right. None of these people manifest in their behavior the humility befitting a repentant sinner.

See that man coming along the street, with a heavy burden on his head; he is bowed down under his burden, he sweats and groans under its weight. If he tripped gaily along, looking cheerfully from side to side, you would soon conclude: "This man does not carry a burden of lead or iron, he must be carrying feathers, or a bag inflated with air; or else is very strong, and does not feel the weight of his load!" Sinner, when you come to confession, having even one mortal sin on your soul, do you know what you bear? A burden of itself capable of dragging you down to the depths of hell; a burden under which David groaned and sighed: "My iniquities are gone over my head; and as a heavy burden are become heavy upon me" (Ps. 37:5). A burden that the heavens could not tolerate in rebel angels, who had sinned against their Creator by a single thought. A burden that engulfed Pharaoh and his host in the Red Sea. A burden that has sunk thousands into hell. And you laugh and sing under the weight of it? You look about you, and show every sign of outward pride, when you come to lay it aside in confession? If you once realized what it is to have made God your enemy, what an endless good you have thereby lost, what a terrible punishment you have thereby incurred, you would almost die of grief and sorrow; you would approach the sacred tribunal like a poor criminal, about to be led forth from court, after having had sentence of death passed upon him.

But what shall I say of those penitents who tell their manifold and grievous sins as coolly and indifferently as if they were telling the latest news; who dispute and argue with their confessor when he tries to persuade them of the malice of their sins, or of their bounden obligations; or who complain of the penance he imposes on them, and grumble against him for not having treated them with sufficient consideration. How then do you expect your confessor to treat you? As a great lord, or a noble lady? No, for you do not appear in that character in the

confessional. There, you are simply a poor sinner deserving of hell, and coming before your Judge to implore his forgiveness. To obtain his grace and mercy, you must not only confess your sins with humility, but also

II. With candor.

The penitent sinner must acknowledge his faults in confession clearly and plainly, without trying to excuse, palliate, lessen, or conceal them. Numbers of people make every effort to throw the blame of their sins off their own shoulders. They put forth as an excuse the weakness of their nature, the sudden surprise of passion, the violence of temptation, which they were unable to overcome under the circumstances, the allurements of an occasion into which they came without intending it, the grievousness of the insult offered them, the high position of the person to please whom they did something unlawful. Thus, they strive to lessen the wickedness and shamefulness of their impurity, drunkenness, vindictiveness, injustice, or anger, so that the confessor may have pity on them, and let them off easy.

King Saul once made a confession of this kind, when he acknowledged his sins to Samuel: "I have sinned," said he: "because I have transgressed the commandment of the Lord, and thy words;" but he immediately added the excuse, "Fearing the people and obeying their voice" (1Kings 15:24). In this way, he tried to make himself appear more innocent than he really was, and therefore, his repentance and confession were rejected by the Lord. "Because thou hast rejected the word of the Lord," continued Samuel, "the Lord hath rejected thee from being king over Israel" (Ibid. 26). How differently David acted! When he saw the angel destroying his people, he cried out: "It is I that have sinned; I have done wickedly!" (2 Kings 24:17). So, every true penitent should say: "It is I who have sinned. The whole malice of the sin lies in my own will; 'through my fault, through my most grievous fault'."

Other cunning penitents tell part of their sins in a clear voice, while they mutter the rest between their teeth, so that the confessor cannot well understand what they are saying. Or else they purposely use equivocating expressions that leave the priest unable to form a positive judgment of their case. For instance, a person says: "I have stolen." "What did you steal?" asks the priest. "I have stolen a purse." "And was it of much value?" "No, it was an old leathern purse that was not worth anything." "Oh!" thinks the confessor: "then it was a small theft." And the penitent goes a-way. But wait a bit! "Was there anything in the purse?" "Yes," there were a hundred dollars in it." "What did you do with them?" "I took them, too!" Oh! That is another thing altogether. Mark the craftiness of this sinner, who instead of saying that he stole the money, says merely that he took the purse.

Many confess their sins in this way. A light and worldly woman, for example, accuses herself thus: "I have sometimes given way to vanity and curiosity?" What do you mean by that? Are you not trying to hide dangerous looks and wanton gestures under the name of vanity and curiosity? Those impure thoughts and desires which you occasion in yourself and others by your unwarranted freedom in company, are they merely sins of vanity? The jealousy and secret rage of your husband, who notices your conduct, is that, too, mere vanity? The profanation of the house of God, in which you appear dressed in a scandalous style, that might easily excite others to sin, is that only vanity? The desire and secret longing for an unlawful affection on the part of those who see you thus tricked out, the reading of impure love-romances, the bad example you give your household, are these, and all the sins that follow from them, to be classed simply as mere curiosity and vanity? No; you are not candid in confession. "I have sought sensual pleasure," says another. What do you mean by sensual pleasure? Looking closely into it, the priest often finds it to have been some carnal and illicit pleasure, which should have been confessed by quite another and more shameful name. Make a clean breast of the whole matter or else your confession is of no value. "I have spoken ill of my neighbor," says another. Out with it at once! Did you not speak ill of your neighbor through hatred and vindictiveness? Did you lessen his good name? Was what you said true or false? Did you speak in presence of one, or of several? Another confesses: "I was angry": but what did you do in your anger? "I was idle." What was the consequence of your idleness? Did you neglect your household duties, or the care of your children? All these things have to be declared to the priest, if your confession is to be a good and valid one, in the sight of God.

Ah, with reason does David complain, that "iniquity hath lied to itself" (Ps. 26:12). Christians, what do you gain by those false confessions? Whom do you deceive? God? The priest? Or yourselves? The priest, who cannot see your heart, may sometimes, indeed, be tricked into giving you absolution; but the almighty God, whom the priest represents, will call out to your conscience: "Why do you pretend to be what you are not? I

know you thoroughly; and therefore, I now announce eternal death to you. Instead of saying, 'I absolve you,' I say 'I condemn you!'" Ah, unhappy sinner, if your God condemns you, who then can absolve you? Do you madly wish to transform the confessional, which our Lord Jesus Christ has made a throne of grace, into a stern judgment-seat, in which, by your hypocritical confession, you will provoke against yourself the sentence of eternal damnation?

Henceforth, make your confession as if (which is in reality the case), you were before God's very eyes. Confess your sins humbly and candidly, with all their circumstances, as far as you know you are guilty of them; and then you can confidently expect one day, to find written in the great account-book the words which the priest in God's place here pronounces over you: "I absolve thee from thy sins; they are all blotted out. Enter into the joy of your Lord amongst the number of true penitents." Amen.

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