

SORROW FOR SIN

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At the approach of Lent, the Church vividly reminds us of our mortal condition. On Ash Wednesday she marks our brows in the sign of the Cross with ashes: "Dust thou art, and unto dust thou shalt return." The words she borrows are those of God Himself in the Garden of Eden, when, in punishment of sin, He condemned our first parents to a life of toil and sorrow, until by death they "should return to the earth out of which they had been taken." It might seem a needless thing to remind us that we shall die. With a wisdom given by God the Holy Ghost, the Church unflinching brings to mind the sentence of death, under which every man lives. At the same time, since by "sin death entered into the world," the Church summons us to repent of all our sins, while yet the mercy of God is disposed to grant us the grace of sorrow and amendment. "Let us amend for the better in the things in which through ignorance we have sinned, lest being suddenly overtaken by the day of death, we seek a space for repentance and find it not. Hearken, O Lord, and have mercy, for we have sinned against Thee." In this prayer of Ash Wednesday is found the story of mankind and the unending call of God to return to Him in penance. "Be converted to Me with all your heart. Turn to the Lord, your God, for He is gracious and merciful."

In the Old Testament

The Old Testament, which the Church uses so frequently in the Mass during Lent, might seem to be but the recital of the unfaithfulness of God's chosen people. It is much more the touching narrative of the patience wherewith God chastised His people unto sorrow, in a long preparation for the Divine Redeemer Who should save them from their sins. Thus Abraham is seen to intercede with God for the guilty cities, and Moses, by his penance, succeeds in saving all his people. The Prophets in succession urge repentance in order to avert God's anger. By the sufferings which are a penalty for sin, God breaks the pride of sinners. "I have broken their heart that was faithless and revolted from Me. They shall know that I am the Lord." Solomon, at the dedication of the Temple, prays that "if the people have sinned and been afflicted and, by reason of their afflictions, do penance in their hearts and be converted from their sins, then May God hear them and, as He shall see their hearts, forgive them their sins." Time after time in the Sacred Writings the readiness of God to pardon the truly penitent is emphasised. "I will forgive their iniquities and I will remember their sin no more. Pitying, I will pity, saith the Lord. If the wicked do penance for all his sins which he hath committed, and keep all my commandments, I will not remember all his iniquities that he hath done. Is it my will (asks the Creator) that a sinner should die and not that he should be converted from his ways and live?" The Book of Psalms is a sinner's admission of his manifold guilt, the sorrow of a contrite and humiliated heart, a cry for mercy to the heart of God, in whom alone is the hope of peace. The Old Testament indeed speaks much of the heavy chastisement of sin, but it is in the Old Testament that we read a prayer such as that of Esther or Daniel or Tobias, filled with the grief of genuine penance, and confident in the tenderness of a forgiving Father. "O how good and sweet is Thy spirit, O Lord, in all things, for by little and little, Thou chastiseth them that err: and admonisheth them and speaketh to them concerning the things wherein they offend: that, leaving their wickedness they may believe in Thee."

In the Gospels

When, in the course of time, God sent His last messenger to prepare men for the coming of the Divine Redeemer, St. John the Baptist had no other message than that of all the Prophets. "Do penance," said John, "for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand." Nor was his language less vivid than that of Jeremias or Isaias. "Ye brood of vipers, bring forth fruit worthy of penance." It was the change of heart that was sought, not the appearance of goodness. "And the people," we read, "confessing their sins, were baptised unto penance. This cleansing of the heart made men ready for the preaching of Him Who was to come, Whose shoes, said John, he was not worthy to loose. Jesus Christ would thoroughly cleanse the threshing-floor. His wheat He would gather into the barn; the chaff He would burn with unquenchable fire. For, St. John confessed: "This is the Son of God, the Lamb of God Who taketh away the sin of the world."

It is indeed strange that the Son of God, at the opening of His public life, should have used the very words of St. John the Baptist concerning repentance: He began to preach and to say: Do penance, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand." Explaining His mission in the synagogue at Nazareth, He applied to Himself the striking text of Isaias "This day," He said, "is fulfilled this scripture in your ears: the spirit of the Lord is upon Me. Wherefore He hath anointed Me to preach the Gospel to the poor. He hath sent Me to heal the contrite of heart, to set at liberty them that are bruised." When first Our Divine Lord sent out the Twelve, the mission He gave them was no different from His own: "going forth they preached that men should do penance." On one occasion, solemnly He uttered the dread warning to His disciples: "I say to you: except you do penance you shall all likewise perish." And lest the words might not be correctly grasped, at once, in the same solemn form, He repeated the judgment. At the very end of His life, when speaking to His Apostles, a few moments before ascending into Heaven, "He opened their understanding that they might understand the Scriptures." At this final farewell Our Divine Lord recalled the message of repentance that explained His life and death: "And He said to them: Thus it is written and thus it behoved Christ to suffer and to rise again from the dead, the third day; and that penance and remission of sins should be preached in His name, unto all nations."

After the Ascension

How faithfully the Apostles fulfilled the mandate to preach repentance for sin, we can see throughout the Acts of the Apostles. Immediately after the descent of the Holy Ghost, St. Peter in his first sermon rebuked his hearers for their share in the crucifixion of the Son of God. Struck with sorrow, they asked: "What shall we do?" "Do penance," answered the Apostle: "be baptised every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ, for the remission of your sins." In his second sermon St. Peter cried out to the people, who had witnessed the cure of the man born lame: "Be penitent and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out." In the presence of the High Priest, the Chief of the Apostles bore this witness to His Divine Master: "Him hath God exalted to be Prince and Saviour, to give repentance and remission of sins." St. Paul teaches that "the benignity of God leadeth us to penance." Baptism for the Apostle is a death to sin, a resurrection to newness of spirit and holiness of life. "A faithful saying," he writes, "and worthy of all acceptance: that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners." With St. John, the Apostle of the love of God, penance is equally a stern demand of God. "They shall be in very great tribulation, except they do penance from their deeds." The wicked are thus described in the Apocalypse: "They blasphemed God because of their pains and wounds: and did not penance for their works." Of the elect it is written: "Such as I love, I rebuke and chastise. Be zealous therefore and do penance." Thus in the early Church, to "teach and preach Christ Jesus" is to announce the message of repentance unto the remission of sins.

The Mind of the Church

Nor has the mind of the Church in any sense changed during two thousand years. The priest, in his preparation for Mass, begins: "Remember not, O Lord, our sins nor the sins of our forebears; neither do Thou take vengeance for our sins." The Mass itself commences with an avowal of our guilt as sinners; its prayers are filled with the entreaties of the Church for purification. "Visit, we beseech Thee, O God, and purify our consciences, that Jesus Christ, Our Lord, Thy Son, on coming to us, may find in us a dwelling-place made ready for Himself." "O God, to Whom all hearts lie open and every will doth speak and from Whom no secret is concealed, purify, by the outpouring of the Holy Ghost, the thoughts of our heart." Immediately before the Consecration, the Church prays that God in His mercy would snatch us from eternal damnation. At a moment when it might be thought that the soul was pure, the Church, at Holy Communion, makes the priest repeat the humble confession of the Centurion: "Lord, I am not worthy that Thou shouldst enter under my roof: yet, say only the word, and my soul shall be healed." Before the Faithful are communicated, the priest holds up the Sacred Host for adoration and the prayer he recites is not an act of fervent charity but the words of St. John the Baptist that remind us of our sins and our utter dependence on the Redeemer: "Behold Him, the Lamb of God: behold Him, Who taketh away the sins of the world."

Our Sinfulness

We are tempted to wonder at this emphasis on our sinful condition and on the need for sorrow for our sins. It is that we do not understand how often and how insistently Our Divine Master spoke of our sinfulness before God. We are apt to put aside His words as having been addressed to a people, distant in time and country, and living in a pagan world. We forget that the teaching of Jesus Christ is meant for each and every man, at whatsoever time he may be born on earth. We fail to believe that He Who spoke “knew all men, and knew what was in man.”

Thus, there is not an aspect of our fallen condition that has escaped the notice of our Divine Saviour. His sermons and parables and encounters with the people of His time reveal the full extent of human negligence and malice. God alone is good, Our Divine Master teaches; men are wicked, debtors to God, who have not wherewith to pay. The grosser sins of injustice and sensuality are referred to in the Parables of the Unjust Steward and the Unjust Judge and the Prodigal Son. But the condemnation of Our Divine Lord bears for the most part upon the neglect of God in human life. Men have set their hearts on the visible things of the earth. “Where their treasure is, there will be their heart; and, in practice, they have forgotten God. Thus are they choked with the anxieties and riches and pleasures of this life.” “The light that is in them becomes darkness.” God, Who alone must be adored and served, is despised, for “no man can serve two masters.” “God knoweth your hearts, warns Our Divine Master; that which is high to men is an abomination to God.” Our sin, too, He shows in the Parable of the Prodigal Son, takes on the character of a heartless ingratitude. “God came unto His own,” we read, “and His own received Him not.” But sin becomes in its effects still more terrible, when it generates the wilful blindness that hates the light of Jesus Christ. “And men loved the darkness, for their works were evil.” Such a darkness of soul makes of man a bond-slave, controlled and even possessed by Satan. The sinner can reach the wickedness of hating God. When the enemies of Jesus Christ, urged on by Satan, crucified the Son of God, in envy and in hatred, for one moment it might have seemed that the sin of man had triumphed. But in that very moment, God, in His unspeakable love, used the hatred of man to accomplish the work of our redemption. The shedding of the Precious Blood was the price of the remission of all our sins.

The Mercy of Our Divine Redeemer

The mercy of the Sacred Heart towards sinners was frequently made evident during Our Divine Lord’s life. He wept over Jerusalem that had slain the Prophets, who troubled its peace by their call to penance. In the end, the same Jerusalem would crucify Himself: “if thou hadst known, and that in this thy day, the things that are to thy peace: but now they are hidden from thy eyes.” He pardoned the Magdalene. He had pity on the multitude, for that they lay like sheep without a shepherd. He had cried out: “if any man thirst, let him come to Me, the fount of living water, and drink.” He had invited the weary souls of sinful men: “Come to Me all you who labour and are burdened, and I will refresh you. My yoke is sweet and my burden light.” Looking down from Calvary, He had pleaded for forgiveness even for those whose wilful blindness had nailed Him to the Cross. Yet, in a sense, at no moment did the unrequited mercy of His all-loving Heart pour gentler balm on humankind than when He said to His Apostles, just before He departed from the earth “Receive ye the Holy Ghost, whose sins ye shall forgive, they are forgiven them: whose sins ye shall retain, they are retained.” At that moment we were given His Sacrament of sorrow.

True Sorrow for Sin

All supernatural sorrow for sin must find its origin in Faith. It is not a mere regret that we have failed, much less a grief that we have lost the chance of sinning again. It is a lowly avowal of sin, made with the help of grace. True sorrow turns from sin; it detests it as an offence against Almighty God. Thinking on the infinite majesty of God, Whom sin despises, our sorrow rejects the sin as an evil greater than any other evil. And, as in every mortal sin there is the same offence to God, sorrow must reject all mortal sins. Reflecting on the fulness of the evil, as our holy Faith reveals it, our sorrow understands that sin deprives us at once of sanctifying grace, and, excluding us from the company and friendship of God, merits the eternal punishment of Hell? But sorrow can, reach an even greater height, with the aid of grace. If we consider that sin revolts against God, our Creator and our Father, Who is Himself all-good; if we reflect that sin has caused the death of God made man, and that the proof to us of God’s unspeakable, nay infinite, goodness is His death to save us from all sin, then sorrow is become an act of perfect love which reconciles us

to God. Only love returned can compensate for love refused. And thus in perfect contrition there is no longer the mere anxiety of justice to repair a sin against the majesty of God, but rather the charity that clings to God, with all one's heart, as infinitely good, and strives to repair the insult to God Who is our Father, Our Redeemer and our Friend.

The Sorrow Needed for the Sacrament

Such a sorrow is not based on emotions: it rests on Faith. "They shall know that I am the Lord their God." True sorrow is an understanding of sin as an offence against God. It springs from the will which, assisted by grace, turns away from sin in order to submit to God completely. "I will give you a new heart, and I will cause you to walk in My commandments." How perfect our sorrow is, only the eye of God can fathom. We, who know our own fickle heart and feeble love of God, might well doubt the value of our sorrow to wipe away all sins in perfect charity. But God, in His unending mercy, does not leave us to wonder whether our sins have been forgiven. He has given us the Sacrament of Penance, and in that Sacrament He does not exact the perfect sorrow of contrition. He, Who "knows what is in man," is pleased to accept the sorrow that considers sin chiefly as an offence against God, which deprives us of grace and deserves the eternal loss of God. Without genuine sorrow inspired by Faith, there cannot in fact be any Sacrament of Penance. But we may well ask if God could have made more easy the conditions of sorrow for that Sacrament. Few things can prove to us more cogently the endless love of the Sacred Heart of Jesus than the ease with which we can receive, and know with certainty that we have received, forgiveness of all our sins in the Sacrament of sorrow.

In Preparation for Absolution

Because the fruit of the Precious Blood is easy to receive in this Sacrament, we should be all the more careful to prepare our hearts for absolution. By our sins, be they grave or venial, we have offended God. Suppose that Jesus Christ were to examine my conscience and recount my sins, as He numbered the insults that He had received in the house of the Pharisee. One day He will detail all my sins in the judgement, immediately after death. Today as we prepare for absolution, let us each kneel down before Him and pray that He may look on us as He looked on the Magdalene, on the woman taken in sin and on St. Peter. May He never look on us as He looked on Judas, who turned forever from His love! If our sins be those that spring from discouragement and human respect, let us kneel before Our Divine Redeemer as He prays in agony in the Garden. If our faults be those that offend against chastity in ourselves or in others, let us kneel before His blood-stained Body in the scourging at the Pillar. If our offences are sins of pride or faults against charity, let us kneel before Our Saviour, mocked and spat upon and crowned with thorns. If we must bewail the relapse into sin, let us kneel before the dying Saviour, as He struggles to Calvary and falls beneath the burden of our wickedness. And at Calvary, one and all can kneel before the Crucified; there is not one of us who has not helped to crucify Him, because there is no sin of man that has not had its share in His Passion and redeeming death.

Absolution

Thus to examine our consciences before Our loving Saviour, in the stages of His Passion, is already to prepare our hearts for the act of genuine sorrow, which turns from sin as evil and clings to God, resolved with His grace never to sin again. When we kneel, as befits a sinner, before the priest who receives our confession and adjudges our guilt, we kneel before Jesus Christ Himself. As in the Consecration at Mass the priest, who takes Christ's place, says "This is My body," so in the Sacrament of Penance, the priest declares: "I absolve thee from thy sins." It is Jesus Christ Himself Who absolves us in this Sacrament as truly as when He stretched forth His hand and raised from death the widow's son of Naim. While we make our humble admission of sin, while we reject with detestation all sin which helped to crucify Him, while we determine with His grace never to sin again, it is Our Divine Lord Himself Who declares as long ago in the days of His life in Palestine: "thy sins are forgiven thee. Go in peace and sin no more."

To sin no more

To sin no more is the privilege of the Blessed, who are with God. We do not doubt God's mercy, nor the full forgiveness of the Sacrament of Penance, but we know that we have sinned and we greatly fear that we shall sin again.

Yet, here and now, in the act of sorrow that we make, we recognise the evil of our, sin: we wish that we had never offended God: we long never to sin again; we bring our will to bear on the flight from such occasions as we know could induce us to repeat our sin. We know that it is precisely on the sins that we have confessed with sorrow that the special grace of the Sacrament directs its light and strength. We set our trust no longer in the feeble barrier of our own poor resolutions, but in the Precious Blood of Jesus Christ. To Him in loving humility, we entrust our unstable wills. With childlike love, we confide in the protecting intercession of Our Lady, because He gave her to us on Calvary to be our Mother and our Refuge. To remedy the weakness of our will, we accept, together with the penance imposed by the priest, all the suffering of our life, in particular, the pain we shall undergo in avoiding further sin.” Our temptations do not soil us, but they harass and. discourage us. They can be made a reparation for the past and a confiding act of love, if, in union with Our Divine Lord in the Agony at Gethsemane, we turn at once to God and protest that by His grace we choose His Will, whatever suffering it may cost us in body or in soul: “not my will, Lord Jesus, but Thine alone, now and at every moment and for always.”

Abiding Sorrow

True sorrow restrains from further sin. “Wash me yet more from my iniquity,” prayed the Psalmist, and the Church continues to repeat his prayer. When we have knelt before our loving Lord in all the scenes of His bitter Passion, we must share His horror of sin as an offence against the all-holy God. When we have knelt beside Our Lady of Sorrows at the foot of the Crucifix, something of her grief at sin passes into our heart and soul. By a refinement of grace, our conscience gradually becomes more delicately sensitive. The knowledge of our failures purifies our pride and urges us to the reparation of a greater love. “All the day, in a sense, sorrow is in our heart,” but the grief is become a sweetness, for it rests upon the confidence of sin forgiven in His sacrament of sorrow.

It is a sad, strange fact that, when we shall have come into the vision of God in Heaven, and can no longer sin, we shall see at once the Five most Precious Wounds of Jesus Christ. In eternity and for eternity, we shall remember that we have sinned. He has kept in His hands and feet the trace of the nails, and in His side the wound of the lance, that we may for ever praise the mercy of the Sacred Heart, Which shed its blood to be the remission of our sins.
