

THE SERMONS OF ST. JOHN MARY VIANNEY

No. 6

THE BAD DEATH

If you ask me what most people understand by a bad death, I will reply: "When a person dies in the prime of life, married, enjoying good health, having wealth in abundance, and leaves children and a wife desolate, there is no doubt but that such a death is very tragic." King Ezechiel said: "What, my God! It is necessary that I die in the midst of my years, in the prime of my life!" And the Prophet-King asks God not to take him in his prime. Others say that to die at the hands of the executioner on the gallows is a bad death. Others say that a sudden death is a bad death, as, for instance, to be killed in some disaster, or to be drowned, or to fall from a high building and be killed. And then some say that the worst thing is to die of some horrible disease, like the plague or some other contagious malady.

And yet, my dear brethren, I am going to tell you that none of these are bad deaths. Provided that a person has lived well, if he dies in his prime, his death will not fail to be valuable in God's eyes. We have many saints who died in the prime of their lives. It is not a bad death, either, to die at the hands of the executioner. All the martyrs died at the hands of executioners. To die a sudden death is not to die a bad death either, provided one is ready.

We have many saints who died deaths of that sort.

St. Simeon was killed by lightning on his pillar. St. Francis de Sales died of apoplexy. Finally, to die of the plague is not a dreadful death. St. Roch and St. Francis Xavier died of it.

But what makes death bad is sin. Ah, this horrible sin which tears and devours at this dread moment! Alas, no matter where the poor, unfortunate sinner looks, he sees only sin and neglected graces! If he lifts his eyes to Heaven, he sees only an angry God, armed with all the fury of His justice, Who is ready to punish him. If he turns his gaze downwards, he sees only Hell and its furies already opening its gates to receive him. Alas! This poor sinner did not want to recognise the justice of God during his life on earth; at this moment, not only does he see it, but he feels it already pressing down upon him. During his lifetime, he was always trying to hide his sins, or at least to make as little of them as possible. But at this moment everything is shown to him as in the broad light of day. He sees now what he should have seen before, what he did not want to see. He would like to weep for his sins, but he has no more time. He scorned God during his lifetime; God now, in His turn, scorns him and abandons him to his despair.

Listen, hardened sinners, you who are wallowing now, with such pleasure, in the slime of your vice, without casting even a thought upon amending your lives, who perhaps will give thought to this only when God has abandoned you, as has happened to people less guilty than you. Yes, the Holy Ghost tells us that sinners in their last moments will gnash their teeth, will be seized by a horrible dread, at the very thought of their sins.

Their iniquities will rise up before them and accuse them. "Alas!" they will cry at this dread moment, "alas! Of what use is this pride, this vain ostentation, and all those pleasures we have been enjoying in sin? Everything is finished now. We have not a single item of virtue to our credit but have been completely conquered by our evil passions." This is exactly what happened to the unhappy Antiochus, who, when he fell from his chariot, shattered his whole body.

He experienced such dreadful pain in his entrails that it seemed to him as if someone were tearing them out. The worms started to gnaw at him while he was still alive, and his whole body stank like carrion. Then he began to open his eyes. This is what sinners do—but too late.

"Ah," he cried, "I realise now that it was the evils which I committed in Jerusalem that are tormenting me now and gnawing at my heart." His body was consumed by the most frightful sufferings and his spirit with an inconceivable sadness. He got his friends to come to him, thinking that he might find some consolation in them. But no. Abandoned by God, Who gives consolation, he could not find it in others.

"Alas, my friends," he said to them, "I have fallen into a terrible affliction. Sleep has left me. I cannot rest for a single instant. My heart is pierced with grief. To what a terrible state of sadness and anguish I am reduced! It seems that I must die of sorrow, and in a strange country, too. Ah, Lord, pardon me! I will repair all the evil that I have done. I will pay back all I took from the temple in Jerusalem. I will present great gifts to the temple. I will become a Jew. I

will observe the Law of Moses. I will go about publicising the omnipotence of God. Ah, Lord, have mercy on me, please!” But his illness increased, and God, Whom he had scorned during his life, no longer had ears to hear him. He was a proud man, a blasphemer, and despite his urgent prayers, he was not listened to and had to go to Hell. It is a grievous but a just punishment that sinners, who throughout their lives have spurned all the graces which God has offered them, find no more graces when they would like to profit by them. Alas! The number of people who die thus in the sight of God is great. Alas! That there are so many of these blind people who do not open their eyes until the moment when there are no further remedies for their ills! Yes, my dear brethren, yes, a life of sin and a death of rejection! You are in sin and you do not wish to give it up? No, you say. Very well, my children, you will perish in sin. You will see that in the death of Voltaire, the notorious blasphemer.

Listen carefully and you will see that if we despise God always and if God waits for us during our lives, often, by a just judgment, He will abandon us at the hour of our death, when we would like to return to Him. The idea that one can live in sin and give it all up one day is one of the Devil’s traps which will cause you to lose your soul as it has caused so many others to lose theirs. Voltaire, realising that he was ill, began to reflect upon the state of the sinner who dies with his conscience loaded with sins. He wished to examine his conscience and to see whether God would be willing to pardon him all the sins of his life, which were very great in number. He counted upon the mercy of God, which is infinite, and with this comforting thought in mind, he had brought to him one of those priests whom he had so greatly outraged and calumniated in his writings. He threw himself upon his knees and made a declaration to him of his sins and put into his hands the recantation of all his impieties and his scandals. He began to flatter himself on having achieved the great work of his reconciliation. But he was gravely mistaken. God had abandoned him; you will see how. Death anticipated all spiritual help. Alas! This unfortunate blasphemer felt all his terrors reborn in him. He cried out: “Alas, am I then abandoned by God and men?”

Yes, unhappy man, you are. Already your lot and your hope are in Hell. Listen to this godless man; he cries out with that mouth sullied with so many profanities and so much blasphemy against God, His religion, and His ministers. “Ah,” he cried, “Jesus Christ, Son of God, who died for all sinners without distinction, have pity on me!”

But, alas! Almost a century of blasphemy and impiety had exhausted the patience of God, Who had already rejected him.

He was no more than a victim which the wrath of God fattens for the eternal flames. The priests whom he had so derided but whom, in this moment he so desired, were not there. See him as he falls into convulsions and the horrors of despair, his eyes wild, his face ghastly, his body trembling with terror! He twists and turns and torments himself and seems as if he wants to atone for all those previous blasphemies with which his mouth had been so often sullied. His companions in irreligion, fearing, lest someone might bring him the last Sacraments, something which would have seemed to them to dishonour their cause, brought him to a house in the country, and there, abandoned to his despair ... [sermon unfinished - Trans.]

HIS PRAYER IS A LIE

I am sure you would like to know the prayer of a sinner who neither wants to give up his sin nor is much disturbed by the thought of offending God. Listen: the first word he says as he commences the prayer is a lie. He enters into contradiction with himself.” In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost.” Stop a moment, my friend! You say that you are commencing your prayer in the name of the Three Persons of the Holy Trinity. But surely you must then have forgotten that it is only a week since you were in a crowd where everyone was saying that when one dies, everything is over and that being so, there must be neither God, nor Hell, nor Heaven. If, my dear friend, in your hardness of heart you really believe that, you do not come to pray; you come only to amuse yourself and to pass the time. Ah, you will tell me, those who talk that way are fairly uncommon. Nevertheless, there are some of them among those who are listening to me and yet who do not fail to say some prayers from time to time.

Furthermore, I could, if I wished, show you that three-quarters of those who are here in this church, although they do not actually say such things with their lips, say them very often by their conduct and their way of life. For if a Christian really thinks of what he says when he pronounces the names of the Three Persons of the Holy Trinity, would he not be gripped with a fear which would amount almost to despair when he brought before his mind the image of the

Father, which he has defaced in such a shocking way, the image of the Son, which is in his soul, which he has dragged through the slime of his vices, and the image of the Holy Ghost, of whom his heart is the temple and the tabernacle, which he has filled with squalor and obscenity?

Yes, my dear brethren, if the sinner had any knowledge of what he says and what he is, could he pronounce these three names without dying of horror? Listen to this liar: "Oh, my God! I firmly believe that you are here present." Is that so, my friend? Do you really believe that you are in the presence of God, before Whom the angels, who are without stain, tremble and dare not raise their eyes, before Whom they cover themselves with their wings, not being able to withstand the glory of that majesty which Heaven and earth cannot contain? And you, all covered in sins, kneeling there on one knee, do you dare to open your mouth to utter such an abomination?

Say, rather, that you are merely imitating, that you are only doing what you see others doing, or, rather, that you are spending a few moments amusing yourself by acting as if you were praying.

HOW BLIND THE SINNER IS!

You will protest to me that this was not at all your intention when you started to pray: "The Lord protect me from committing such a horrible thing!" A nice excuse, my friend! So anyone who commits a sin has no intention of losing grace? Yet he cannot help but lose it. Is he less guilty of the sin? Undoubtedly no, because he knows very well that he cannot do such and such an action, or say such and such a thing, without incurring the guilt of mortal sin. The intention of all the damned who now burn in Hell was certainly not to get themselves damned. Are they the less guilty for all that? No, certainly not, because they knew that they would damn themselves by living the way they lived. A sinner who says his prayers with sin in his heart, without the intention of losing grace, has not the intention of mocking and insulting Jesus Christ. It is none the less true, however, that he does mock Him because he knows well that anyone mocks God when he says to Him: "O my God, I love You," while he loves the sin, or, "I will go to Confession." Listen to that for a lie! He is not even thinking of going to Confession or of being converted from his sin.

But, tell me, what is your intention when you come to church or when you say—as you call it—your prayers? It is, perhaps you will tell me—if you have the hardihood to say it—to perform an act of religion, to give to God the honour and the glory which belong to Him. Oh, horror! Oh, blindness! Oh, impiety! To wish to honour God by lies—in other words, to want to honour Him by what will outrage Him. Oh, abomination! To have Jesus Christ on your lips and to have Him crucified in your heart! To join what is most holy to what is most detestable, which is the service of the Devil! Oh, what horror! To offer to God a soul which has already been a thousand times prostituted to the Devil! Oh, my God, how blind the sinner is, and all the more blind in that he does not know himself nor even want to know himself! Was I not right at the beginning to tell you that the prayer of the sinner is nothing other than a tissue of lies and of contradictions? That is so true that the Holy Ghost tells us Himself that the prayer of the sinner who does not wish to renounce his sin is an execration in the eyes of the Lord. You will agree with me that this state is very terrifying and deserving of pity. Very well! Look at how sin blinds one! I say without fear of lying that at least half of those who are listening to me here in this church are in that state. Yet, in fact, is it not true that that does not touch you, but rather that you are bored and that time hangs heavily upon you? You see, my friends, the gloomy abyss to which sin leads a sinner. To begin with, you know that you have been in sin for six months, or a year, or more, and yet are you not quite contented?

Well yes, you will tell me. That is not difficult to believe, since sin has blurred your vision. You no longer see anything in that state which has hardened your heart so that you no longer feel anything either, and I am just as sure that nothing I have said to you will cause you to think any further about it. Oh, my God, into what depths does sin lead us! So, you will say, it is of no use saying any more prayers since ours are only insults which we are paying to God. That was not what I wanted you to understand when I told you that your prayers were merely lies. But instead of saying, "My God, I love You," say, "My God, I do not love You, but all I ask is the grace to love You." Instead of saying, "My God, I am very sorry for having offended You," say to Him, "My God, I do not feel any sorrow for my sins, but give me all the sorrow which I ought to have for them." Very far from saying, "My God, I would like to confess my sins," say instead, "My God, I feel myself very much attached to my sins, and it seems to me that I do not

want ever to renounce them; give me that horror which I ought to feel for them, so that I may abhor them, detest them, and confess them, so that I may never go back to them! “

O my God, give us, please, that eternal horror of sin, since it is Your enemy, since it was sin that caused Your death, since it robs us of Your friendship, since it separates us from You. O divine Saviour, grant that whenever we come to pray, we shall do so with hearts detached from sin, hearts that love You, and hearts that in speaking to You will speak only the truth! That is the grace, my dear brethren, that I desire for you.

PRISONERS OF SIN

If we understood fully what it is to receive the sacraments, we should bring to the reception of them very much better sentiments than those we do. It is true that the greater number of people, in hiding their sins, always keep at the back of their minds the thought of acknowledging them.

Without a miracle, they will not be any the less lost for that. If you want the reason, it is very easy to give it to you. The more we remain in that terrible state which makes Heaven and earth tremble, the more the Devil takes control of us, the more the grace of God diminishes in us, the more our fear increases, the more our sacrileges multiply, and the more we fall away. The result is that we put ourselves almost beyond the possibility of returning into favour with God. I will give you a hundred examples of this against one to the contrary. Tell me, my dear brethren, can you even hope that after passing perhaps five or six years in sacrilege, during which you outraged God more than did all the Jews together, you would dare to believe that God is going to give you all the graces which you will need to emerge from this terrible state? You think that notwithstanding the many crimes against Jesus Christ of which you have been guilty, you have only to say: “I am going to give up sin now and all will be over.”

Alas, my friends! Who has guaranteed to you that Jesus Christ will not have made to you the same threat He made to the Jews and pronounce the same sentence which He pronounced against them? You did not wish to profit by the graces which I wanted to give you; but I will leave you alone, and you will seek Me and you will not find Me, and you will die in your sin!

Alas, my dear brethren, our poor souls, once they are in the Devil’s hands, will not escape from these as easily as we would like to believe.... Look, my dear brethren, at what the Devil does to mislead us. When we are committing sin, he represents it to us as a mere trifle. He makes us think that there are a great many others who do much worse than we do. Or again, that as we will be confessing the sin, it will be as easy to say four times as twice.

But once the sin has been committed, he acts in exactly the opposite way. He represents the sin to us as a monstrous thing.

He fills us with such a horror of it that we no longer have the courage to confess it. If we are too frightened to keep the sin hidden, he tells us, to reassure us, that we will confess it at our very next Confession. Subsequently, he tells us that we will not have the courage to do that now, that it would be better to wait for another time to confess it. Take care, my dear brethren; it is only the first step which costs the effort. Once in the prison of the sin, it is very difficult, indeed, to break out of it....

But, you are thinking, I do not really believe that there are many who would be capable of hiding their sins because they would be too much troubled by them. Ah, my dear brethren, if I had to affirm on oath whether there were or were not such people, I would not hesitate to say that there are at least five or six listening to me who are consumed by remorse for their sins and who know that what I say is true. But have patience; you will see them on the day of judgment, and you will recall what I have said to you today. Oh, my God, how shame and fear can hold a Christian soul prisoner in such a terrifying state! Ah, my dear brethren, what are you preparing for yourselves?

You do not dare to make a clean breast of it to your pastor? But is he the only one in the world? Would you not find priests who would have the charity to receive you? Do you think that you would be given too severe a penance? Ah, my children, do not let that stop you! You would be helped; the greater part of it all would be done for you. They would pray for you; they would weep for your sins in order to draw down with greater abundance the mercies of God on you! My friends, have pity on that poor soul which cost Jesus Christ so dearly! Oh, my God, who will ever understand the blindness of these poor sinners! You have hidden your sin, my child, but it must be known one day, and then in the eyes of the whole universe, while by one word you would have hidden it forever and you would have

changed your hell for an eternity of happiness. Alas, that a sacrilege can lead these poor sinners so far. They do not want to die in that state, but they have not the strength to leave it. My God, torment them so greatly that they will not be able to stay there!

YOU CAN BECOME A GOOD TREE

Consider now my dear brethren, the good works you have done. Have you done them for God alone, so that there was nothing worldly in them and so that you had no regrets when people sometimes proved ungrateful? Have you ever congratulated yourselves inwardly on the good you have done your neighbour? Because if you have done that, either you have done nothing or you may as well count it as nothing, since you have already lost your reward for it. Do you know, my dear brethren, the decision you have to make? If you have done nothing, or if what you have done has been fruitless because it was done for a human motive, begin immediately to do good works so that at death you will be able to find something to offer to Jesus Christ in order that He may give you eternal life. Perhaps you will say to me: "I have done nothing but evil all my whole life. I am just a bad tree which cannot bring forth good fruit." My dear brethren, that can very well be, as I am going to show you. Change this tree, moisten it with different water, treat it with some other fertiliser, and you will see that it will bear good fruit, even though it has been bearing bad fruit up to the present. If this tree, which is yourself, has been fruitful in pride, in avarice, in impurity, you can, with the grace of God, see to it that these fruits become abundant in humility, in charity, and in purity. Do yourself as did the earth, which, before the Deluge, drew from its own bosom the water to moisten itself, without having recourse to the clouds of heaven to give it fertility. In the same way, my dear brethren, draw from your own hearts that salutary water which will change your dispositions. You have watered this tree with the foul water of your passions. Well, then, from now on, water it with the tears of repentance, of sorrow, and of love, and you will see that you will cease to be a bad tree and will become one which will bear fruit for life eternal.

To show you, my dear brethren, that this can happen, consider the admirable example furnished in the person of St. Mary Magdalen. Remember how, according to Jesus Christ Himself, she was a bad tree, and then how grace made her into a good tree which brought forth good fruit in abundance. St. Luke tells us that she was a sinner and that she was well known as such in the whole city of Jerusalem. I recommend that you consider what significance those words, which came from the lips of Jesus Christ Himself, have for us. Here was a young girl born with the strongest passions, extraordinary beauty, great wealth—that is to say, with that which not merely kindles the passions but which nourishes and feeds them continually.

She was greatly attracted by the pleasures of the world, she had a very strong taste for fashion and a great desire to look beautiful, so that her thoughts and all her cares were employed towards that end. A far from modest air proclaimed openly that her innocence would suffer a speedy shipwreck. Vain and frivolous, the object of admiration by worldlings, she sought all the more to please them, either with provocative glances fired by an impure heart or with her seductive ways and the self-indulgent air which she displayed so brazenly. All of this told a tale of a tree that could only bear plenty of bad fruit. She received with incredible complaisance the gross glances of the worldlings. She accepted with much self-gratification the silly homage of men. She loved, with more than ordinary enjoyment, to move in the well-to-do social circles of her day.

Since she was of great beauty and possessed very considerable wealth, was young and graceful to behold, everyone had, it seemed, eyes and thought for her alone. Dances, spectacles, and the desire to attract and please everyone were all she cared about. If she appeared among the faithful, in the places chosen for prayer, she did so quite eagerly, not to weep for her sins, as she should have been doing, but, rather, to take her place there as the center of attraction that she usually was, to see and—even more—to be seen, and to be admired. Acting thus, it seemed as if she would like to contest with God Himself for men's hearts and the honour which was due Him alone. She went so far that she finished by becoming a subject of scandal throughout the whole city of Jerusalem. The assignations with the young men, the embraces, the far from modest conversations, the depravities to which she surrendered herself, ended by making her come to be looked upon as a young woman of very evil life. She finished by being avoided and despised by all those of any standing. She was called a sinful and scandalous woman by everyone in the city. You will admit that here, indeed, was a bad tree. If you have gone as far as she did, there are few who have passed her up.

Alas, my friends, what a crop of pride was not borne by that head dressed and ornamented with so much care! What fruits of depravity were not produced in that corrupt heart consumed by an impure fire! And so equally with all the other passions which dominated her. I think, my dear brethren, that it would be difficult to find a more evil tree. Yet, my dear brethren, you shall see that, if we are willing to avail ourselves of the grace which is never lacking to us, any more than it was to Mary Magdalen, miserable though we may be, we can change our tree, which up to now has been bearing only bad fruit. We can make it bear good fruit if we will but make use of the grace which comes to our help. From being bad Christians, we can become good and bear fruit worthy of eternal life, as we shall see by the conversion of Mary Magdalen. St. Jerome tells us that while Mary Magdalen was thus abandoned to all her passionate and undisciplined ways of living, the stories of so many miracles worked by our Saviour in curing the sick and raising the dead to life were filling all Judea with astonishment. Everyone was eager to see so extraordinary a man.

Mary Magdalen, happily for herself, was one of this number. The first words which she heard falling from the 'lips of our Saviour were those of the Parables of the Prodigal Son and of the Good Shepherd. She recognised herself exactly in this young man and she also recognised our Saviour as the Good Shepherd.

The shafts of grace were so lively and so penetrating that she could not help but feel their effects. As the words continued, she felt herself moved to tears. The many miracles that she herself had seen and heard filled her with astonishment, and grace completed the work of changing her, of converting her from a really bad tree into a wonderfully good tree which would bring forth excellent fruit. But what completed the work of detaching her from herself and from sin, the work of breaking through all that held her to these, was the great generosity of God towards sinners. Ah, my dear brethren, how powerful grace is when it finds a heart well disposed! Look at her who began by neither thinking nor acting, but grace pursued her, remorse of conscience tormented her, she felt her heart break with sorrow for her sins. Her eyes, which previously had been so bright with the fire of impurity, which she knew so well how to kindle in the hearts of others, began to shed bitter tears.

Since her heart had first tasted the pleasures of the world, she wished it to be the first to feel all the regret for having done evil. From that time, the world of society, which hitherto had held all her pleasure and happiness, could now only weary and disgust her more and more. She discovered that her only happiness lay in being separated from the world and in retirement where she could reflect and shed tears freely.

The more she thought upon the kind of life she had been leading up to then, the outrages she had committed against God, and the number of souls she had lost by her bad life, the more acutely was her heart pierced by sorrow. Such self-love, such proud self-gratification as she had taken in her great beauty, all that worldly homage which had so flattered her—all that now was nothing more to her than a senseless vanity and a kind of idolatry. That vulgar luxury, the worldly amusements which she had always looked upon as the privileges of her age and of her sex, were now in her eyes only a pagan way of living and a real apostasy of her religion. Those passionate sentiments, those indecent liberties, those tender attachments, previously so dear to her heart, and all those mysteries of iniquity, now seemed but crimes and abominations. She realised, as she wept freely and abundantly, that if God had graced her with so many gifts, He had done so but to make her more pleasing to Him. She was therefore the more intensely ashamed of her ingratitude and rebellion.

During these struggles with herself, she learned that a distinguished Pharisee was enjoying the good fortune of entertaining our Saviour at his house. She recalled all that she had heard our Lord saying. Yes, she said to herself, I can no longer doubt but that this is the good and charitable Shepherd and that I am but the lost sheep. Ah, she cried, it was I that He meant when He spoke of that prodigal son. So I will rise up and I will go to find Him! Indeed, unable to contain herself, she started up at once, spurning all her finery and her vanities. She ran, or, rather, the grace with which her heart was already on fire hurried her along. Casting aside all human respect, she entered into the banqueting hall with a downcast air, her hair, previously so beautifully dressed and curled, now quite dishevelled, her eyes lowered and bathed in tears, her face blushing and ashamed.

She threw herself at the feet of the Saviour, Who was at the table." Ah, Magdalen, Magdalen!" cries a Father of the Church, "What are you doing and what have you become? Where are all those pleasures, that vanity and that worldly love?" No, no, my dear brethren, here no longer is Magdalen the sinner, but Magdalen the penitent and the faithful lover of our Lord. Yes, my dear brethren, it was at this moment that everything changed within her. If she had lost so

many souls by a life which had been so scandalous, she is now, by her penitent life, going to win even more than those she has lost. She has nothing of human respect left, she accuses herself publicly of her sins before a large assembly, she embraces the feet of our Saviour, bathes them with her tears, dries them with her hair. No, no, my dear brethren, Magdalen is no longer Magdalen but a holy lover of God! “No, no, my brethren,” St. Augustine says to us, “in Magdalen there is no more vanity, no more pleasure loving, no more worldly love, all is holy and pure in her.”

“Yes, my dear brethren,” this great saint tells us, “those exquisite perfumes which she had given entirely to luxury, that magnificent head of hair so carefully dressed and ornamented, those beautiful eyes animated with such a dangerous fire, all that is now purified in her tears.” “Ah! my dear brethren,” he says to us, “who could tell us what passes in her heart? Everyone of those who were witnesses of this generous gesture turns it into ridicule, treats her as deranged, blames and condemns her, except Jesus Christ Himself, Who knows so well that it is His grace which has done all for her.”

He is so touched by it that He says nothing to her of her sins. But He takes a particular pleasure in praising her for the kindness she has done to Him, and that in front of all the assembled guests: “Go in peace,” He said to her tenderly, “thy sins are forgiven thee.”

Since your soul is as precious in God’s eyes as that of Mary Magdalen’s, you can be quite sure, my dear brethren, that grace will never be wanting to you to convert you and to help you to persevere.

WHERE ARE YOU GOING?

Ah, who would not be touched? A God who weeps with so many tears at the loss of one soul and Who cries unceasingly: My friend, my friend, why proceedest thou thus to lose thy soul and thy God? Stop! Stop! Ah! Look at my tears, my Blood which flows yet. Must I die a second time to save thee? Look at me. Ah! Angels from Heaven descend upon earth, come and weep with me for the loss of this soul! Oh, that a Christian should be so unfortunate as to persevere still in running towards the abyss despite the voice which his God causes him to hear continually! But, you may say to me, no one says these things to us. Oh my friends, unless you want to stop up your ears, you will hear the voice of God, which follows you unceasingly. Tell me, my friends, then, what is this remorse of conscience which overwhelms you in the midst of sin? Why do these anxieties and storms agitate you? Why this fear, this dread that you are in, when you seem to be forever expecting to be crushed by the thunders of Heaven? How many times, even when you were sinning, have you not experienced the touch of an invisible hand which seemed to push you away, as if someone were saying: Unhappy man, what are you doing? Unhappy man, where are you going? Ah my son, why do you wish to damn yourself?

Would you not agree with me that a Christian who despises so many graces deserves to be abandoned and rejected because he has not listened to the voice of God or profited by His graces? On the contrary, my dear brethren, it is God Himself Who is scorned by this ungrateful soul who would seem to wish to put Him to death again. All creation demands vengeance, and it is, in fact, God alone Who wishes to save this soul and Who is opposed to all that could be prejudicial to it.

He watches over its salvation as if it were the only soul in the world.

ANNUAL CONFESSIONS

If Easter were prolonged to Pentecost, you would not go to Confession until Pentecost, or if the latter did not come around for ten years, you would go to Confession only every ten years. Indeed, if the Church did not give you a commandment about it, you would not go to Confession until death. What do you think of that, my dear brethren? Does it not mean that you have neither regret for having offended God, Who requires you to go to Confession, nor love for God, Who requires you to make your Easter Communion? Ah you will say to me, that’s all very well. We do not make our Easter duty without knowing why.

Ah! You know nothing at all about it! You do it from habit, to be able to say you have made your Easter duty, or, if you would prefer to speak the truth, you would say that you have added a new sin to your old ones. It is not, therefore, either love of God or regret for having offended Him which makes you go to Confession or make your Easter duty, or even the desire to lead a more Christian life. And here is the proof of it: if you loved God, would you consent to

commit sin with such ease, and even with so much enjoyment? If you had a horror of sin, as you should have, would you be able to keep it for a whole year on your conscience? If you had a real desire to live a more Christian life, would we not see at least some little change in your way of living? No, my dear brethren, I do not wish to talk to you today about those unfortunate people who tell only half their sins through fear of not making their Easter duty or of being refused Absolution—perhaps even for the sake of covering up their shameful lives with the veil of virtue and who, in this state, approach the altar and are going to complete their dreadful work by handing over their God to the Devil and precipitating their sacrilegious souls into Hell. No, I dare to hope that this does not concern you, but I will continue, nevertheless, to tell you that going to Confession only once a year is not something about which you should feel any peace or satisfaction.

THOUGHTS ABOUT PENANCE

Tell me, my dear brethren, what are the penances that are given to you? Alas! A few rosaries, some litanies, some almsgivings, a few little mortifications. Do all of these things, I ask you, bear any proportion to our sins which deserve eternal punishment? There are some who carry out their penance walking along or sitting down; that is not doing it at all. Unless the priest tells you that you may do it while walking along or sitting down, you should do your penance on your knees. If you do perform your penance while walking along or sitting down, you should confess it and never do it again.

In the second place, unless you are not able to do it as required, in which event you must tell that to your confessor when you go to Confession the next time, I must tell you that the penance should be done within the time indicated; otherwise you commit a sin. For example, the priest might tell you to make a visit to the Blessed Sacrament after the services because he knows that you go around in company which will not bring you any nearer to God; he may order you to mortify yourself in something which you eat because you are subject to gluttony; to make an act of contrition if you have the misfortune to fall back into the sin which you have just confessed. At other times you may wait until the moment when you are ready to go to Confession to do your penance. You understand as well as I do that in all of these instances you are fully at fault and that you should not fail to confess that and that you should never do this again. In the third place, I tell you that you should perform your penance devoutly, that is to say, with reverence and with the sincere intention of giving up the sin. To say your penance reverently, my dear brethren, is to say it with attention to its spiritual importance and with devotion in your hearts. If you have said your penance with wilful distractions, you will not have said it at all and you are obliged to say it again. To perform it devoutly is to perform it with a strong confidence that God will forgive you your sins through the merits of Jesus Christ, Who made satisfaction for us by His sufferings and His death on the Cross. We should perform our penance overwhelmed with joy at being able to satisfy God, Whom we have offended, and at finding such an easy means of effacing our sins which should have earned eternal sufferings for us. Something which you should never forget is that all the time you are fulfilling your penance, you should be saying to God: “My God, I unite this slight penance to that which Jesus Christ my Saviour has offered to You for my sins.” This is what will make your penance meritorious and pleasing to God. I repeat that we should always carry out our penance with the true desire to give up the sin altogether, no matter what it may cost us, even if it involves death itself. If we have not these dispositions, very far from satisfying the justice of God, we will outrage it again, which would make us even more guilty. I have said that we should never content ourselves with the penance which our confessor imposes upon us because it is nothing, or almost nothing, if we compare it with what our sins really deserve. If our confessor is so very lenient with us, it is only lest he might give us a distaste for the work of our salvation. If you really have your salvation at heart, you should impose penances upon yourself.

Choose those which suit your case best. If you have the misfortune to be someone who gives scandal, you should make yourself so watchful of your behaviour that your neighbour will not be able to see anything in your life which would give him anything but good example; you should show by your conduct that your life is truly Christian. If you are one of those unhappy people who sin against the holy virtue of purity, you should mortify that sinful body with fasting, giving it only what it needs to sustain life and to fulfil its functions, from time to time making it sleep upon bare boards. If you are one of those who has to have something to eat which will gratify your gluttony, you should refuse this to your body and despise it as much as you previously loved it. When your body wants to cost you your

soul, you must punish it. Your heart, which must often have thought of impure things, has carried your thoughts into Hell, which is the place reserved for the unchaste.

If you are attached to the things of this earth, you should give alms sufficient to enable you to punish your avarice by depriving yourself of all that is not absolutely necessary for life.

If we have been negligent in the service of God, let us impose upon ourselves the penance of assisting at all the exercises of piety which are going on in our parish. I would advise Mass, Vespers, catechism, prayers, the Rosary, so that God, seeing our eagerness, may be good enough to pardon us all our negligences. If we have spare time between the services, let us do some spiritual reading, which will nourish our souls—above all, some reading of the lives of the saints wherein we may see how they behaved in order to sanctify themselves. That will encourage us. Let us make some short visit to the Blessed Sacrament during the week to ask God to pardon the sins we have committed. If we feel ourselves guilty of some fault, let us go and get rid of it so that our prayers and all our good works may be pleasing to God and more advantageous to our souls. Have we the habit of swearing or of flying into rages? Let us go down on our knees to say again this holy prayer: “My God, may your holy name be blessed for ever and ever! My God, purify my heart, purify my lips so that they may never pronounce words which would outrage you and separate me from you!” Any time that you fall into this sin, you should immediately either make an act of contrition or give away something to the poor. Have you been working on Sunday? Have you been buying or selling without necessity in the course of this holy day?

Give to the poor some alms which will exceed the profit you have made. Have you been eating or drinking to excess? In all your meals you should deprive yourself of something.

Such, my dear brethren, are the penances which will not only suffice to make satisfaction to the justice of God, if joined to those of Jesus Christ, but which can even preserve you from falling again into your sins. If you want to conduct yourselves in this way, you will be sure, with the grace of God, of correcting your faults.
