

PRACTICE DURING LENT

From "The Liturgical Year" by
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Having spent the three weeks of Septuagesima in meditating upon our spiritual infirmities and upon the wounds caused in us by sin, we should be ready to enter upon the penitential season which the Church has now begun. We have now a clearer knowledge of the justice and holiness of God, and of the dangers that await an impenitent soul; and, that our repentance might be earnest and lasting, we have bade farewell to the vain joys and baubles of the world. Our pride has been humbled by the prophecy that these bodies would soon be like the ashes that wrote the memento of death upon our foreheads.

During these forty days of penance, which seem so long to our poor nature, we shall not be deprived of the company of our Jesus. He seemed to have withdrawn from us during those weeks of Septuagesima, when everything spoke to us of His maledictions upon sinful man, but this absence has done us good. It has taught us how to tremble at the voice of God's anger. 'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom';[1] we have found it to be so: the spirit of penance is now active within us, because we have feared.

And now, let us look at the divine object that is before us. It is our Emmanuel; the same Jesus, but not under the form of the sweet Babe whom we adored in His crib. He has grown to the fullness of the age of man, and wears the semblance of a sinner, trembling and humbling Himself before the sovereign Majesty of His Father whom we have offended, and to whom He now offers Himself as the Victim of propitiation. He loves us with a brother's love; and seeing that the season for doing penance has begun, He comes to cheer us on by His presence and His own example. We are going to spend forty days in fasting and abstinence: Jesus, who is innocence itself, goes through the same penance. We have separated ourselves, for a time, from the pleasures and vanities of the world: Jesus withdraws from the company and sight of men. We intend to assist at the divine services more assiduously, and pray more fervently, than at other times: Jesus suppliant; and all this for us. We are going to think over our past sins, and bewail them in bitter grief: Jesus suffers for them and weeps over them in the silence of the desert, as though He Himself had committed them.

No sooner had He received baptism from the hands of St. John, than the Holy Ghost led Him to the desert. The time had come for showing Himself to the world; He would begin by teaching us a lesson of immense importance. He leaves the saintly Precursor and the admiring multitude, that had seen the divine Spirit descend upon Him, and heard the Father's voice proclaiming Him to be His beloved Son; He leaves them and goes into the desert. Not far from the Jordan there rises a rugged mountain, which has received, in after ages, the name of Quarantana. It commands a view of the fertile plain of Jericho, the Jordan, and the Dead Sea. It is within a cave of this wild rock that the Son of God now enters, His only companions being the dumb animals who have chosen this same for their own shelter. He has no food wherewith to satisfy the pangs of hunger; the barren rock can yield Him no drink; His only bed must be of stone. Here He is to spend forty days; after which, He will permit the angels to visit Him and bring Him food.

Thus does our Savior go before us on the holy path of Lent. He has borne all its fatigues and hardships, that so we, when called upon to tread the narrow way of our lenten penance, might have His example wherewith to silence the excuses, and sophisms, and repugnances, of self-love and pride. The lesson is here too plainly given not to be understood; the law of doing penance for sin is here too clearly shown, and we cannot plead ignorance: let us honestly accept the teaching and practice it. Jesus leaves the desert where He has spent the forty days, and begins His preaching with these words, which He addresses to all men: 'Do penance, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.'[2] Let us not harden our hearts to this invitation, lest there be fulfilled in us the terrible threat contained in those other words of our Redeemer: 'Unless you shall do penance, you shall perish.'[3]

Now, penance consists in contrition of the soul, and mortification of the body; these two parts are essential to it. The soul has willed the sin; the body has frequently co-operated in its commission. Moreover, man is composed of both soul and body; both, then, should pay homage to their Creator. The body is to share with the soul either the delights of heaven or the torments of hell; there cannot, therefore, be any thorough Christian life, or any earnest penance, where the body does not take part, in both, with the soul.

But it is the soul which gives reality to penance. The Gospel teaches this by the examples it holds out to us of the prodigal son, of Magdalene, of Zaccheus, and of St. Peter. The soul, then, must be resolved to give up every sin; she must heartily grieve over those she has committed; she must hate sin; she must shun the occasions of sin. The sacred Scriptures have a word for this inward disposition, which has been adopted by the Christian world, and which admirably expresses the state of the soul that has turned away from her sins: this word is conversion. The Christian should, therefore, during Lent, study to excite himself to this repentance of heart, and look upon it as the essential foundation of all his lenten exercises. Nevertheless, he must remember that this spiritual penance would be a mere delusion, were he not to practice mortification of the body. Let him study the example given him by his Savior, who grieves, indeed, and weeps over our sins; but He also expiates them by His bodily sufferings. Hence it is that the Church, the infallible interpreter of her divine Master's will, tells us that the repentance of our heart will not be accepted by God, unless it be accompanied by fasting and abstinence.

How great, then, is the illusion of those Christians, who forget their past sins, or compare themselves with others whose lives they take to have been worse than their own; and thus satisfied with themselves, can see no harm or danger in the easy life they intend to pass for the rest of their days! They will tell you that there can be no need of their thinking of their past sins, for they have made a good confession! Is not the life they have led since that time a sufficient proof of their solid piety? And why should anyone speak to them about the justice of God and mortification? Accordingly, as soon as Lent approaches, they must get all manner of dispensations. Abstinence is an inconvenience; fasting has an effect upon their health, it would interfere with their occupations, it is such a change from their ordinary way of living; besides, there are so many people who are better than themselves, and yet who never fast or abstain. And, as the idea never enters their minds of supplying for the penances prescribed by the Church by other penitential exercises, such persons as these gradually and unsuspectingly lose the Christian spirit.

The Church sees this frightful decay of supernatural energy; but she cherishes what is still left, by making her lenten observances easier, year after year. With the hope of maintaining that little, and of seeing it strengthen for some better future, she leaves to the justice of God her children who hearken not to her when she teaches them how they might, even now, propitiate His anger. Alas! these her children, of whom we are speaking, are quite satisfied that things should be as they are, and never think of judging their own conduct by the examples of Jesus and His saints, or by the undeviating rules of Christian penance.

It is true, there are exceptions; but how rare they are, especially in our large towns! Groundless prejudices, idle excuses, bad example, all tend to lead men from the observance of Lent. Is it not sad to hear people giving such a reason as this for their not fasting or abstaining, -because they <feel> them? Surely, they forget that the very aim of fasting and abstinence is to make these bodies of sin[4] suffer and feel. And what will they answer on the day of judgment, when our Savior shall show them how the very Turks, who were the disciples of a gross and sensual religion, had the courage to practice, every year, the austerities of their Ramadan?

But their own conduct will be their loudest accuser. These very persons, who persuade themselves that they have not strength enough to bear the abstinence and fasting of Lent even in their present mitigated form, think nothing of going through incomparably greater fatigues for the sake of temporal gains or worldly enjoyments. Constitutions which have broken down in the pursuit of pleasures which, to say the least, are frivolous, and always dangerous, would have kept up all their vigor, had the laws of God and His Church, and not the desire to please the world, been the guide of their conduct. But such is the indifference wherewith this non-observance of Lent is treated, that it never excites the slightest trouble or remorse of conscience; and those who are guilty of it will argue with you, that people who lived in the middle ages may perhaps have been able to keep Lent, but that now-a-days it is out of the question: and they can coolly say this in the face of all that the Church has done to adapt her lenten discipline to the physical and moral weakness of the present generation! How comes it that, whilst these men have been trained in, or converted to, the faith of their fathers, they can forget that the observance of Lent is an essential mark of Catholicity; and that when the Protestants undertook to <reform> her, in the sixteenth century, one of their chief grievances was that she insisted on her children mortifying themselves by fasting and abstinence?

But it will be asked: 'Are there, then, no lawful dispensations?' We answer that there are; and that they are more needed now than in former ages, owing to the general weakness of our constitutions. Still, there is great danger of our

deceiving ourselves. If we have strength to go through great fatigues when our own self-love is gratified by them, how is it we are too weak to observe abstinence? If a slight inconvenience deter us from doing this penance, how shall we ever make expiation for our sins? for expiation is essentially painful to nature. The opinion of our physician that fasting will weaken us, may be false, or it may be correct; but is not this mortification of the flesh the very object that the Church aims at, knowing that our soul will profit by the body being brought into subjection? But let us suppose the dispensation to be necessary: that our health would be impaired, and the duties of our state of life neglected, if we were to observe the law of Lent to the letter: do we, in such a case, endeavor, by other works of penance, to supply for those which our health does not allow us to observe? Are we grieved and humbled to find ourselves thus unable to join with the rest of the faithful children of the Church, in bearing the yoke of lenten discipline? Do we ask of our Lord to grant us the grace, next year, of sharing in the merits of our fellow-Christians, and of observing those holy practices which give the soul an assurance of mercy and pardon? If we do, the dispensation will not be detrimental to our spiritual interests; and when the feast of Easter comes, inviting the faithful to partake in its grand joys we may confidently take our place side by side with those who have fasted; for though our bodily weakness has not permitted us to keep pace with them exteriorly, our heart has been faithful to the spirit of Lent.

How long a list of proofs we could still give of the negligence, into which the modern spirit of self-indulgence leads so many among us, in regard of fasting and abstinence! Thus, there are Catholics to be found in every part of the world who make their Easter Communion, and profess themselves to be children of the Catholic Church, who yet have no idea of the obligations of Lent. Their very notion of fasting and abstinence is so vague, that they are not aware that these two practices are quite distinct one from the other; and that the dispensation from one does not, in any way, include a dispensation from the other. If they have, lawfully or unlawfully, obtained exemption from abstinence, it never so much as enters into their minds that the obligation of fasting is still binding upon them during the whole forty days; or if they have had granted to them a dispensation from fasting, they conclude that they may eat any kind of food they wish upon any day. Such ignorance as this is the natural result of the indifference wherewith the commandments and traditions of the Church are treated.

So far, we have been speaking of the non-observance of Lent in its relation to individuals and Catholics; let us now say a few words upon the influence which that same non-observance has upon a whole people or nation. There are but few social questions which have not been ably and spiritedly treated of by the public writers of the age, who have devoted their talents to the study of political economy; and it has often been a matter of surprise to us that they should have overlooked a subject of such deep interest as this: the results produced on society by the abolition of Lent; that is to say, of an institution which, more than any other, keeps up in the public mind a keen sentiment of moral right and wrong, inasmuch as it imposes on a nation an annual expiation for sin. No shrewd penetration is needed to see the difference between two nations, one of which observes, each year, a forty-days' penance in reparation of the violations committed against the law of God, and another, whose very principles reject all such solemn reparation. And looking at the subject from another point of view—is it not to be feared that the excessive use of animal food tends to weaken, rather than to strengthen, the constitution? We are convinced of it: the time will come when a greater proportion of vegetable, and less of animal, diet will be considered as an essential means for maintaining the strength of the human frame.

Let, then, the children of the Church courageously observe the Lenten practices of penance. Peace of conscience is essential to Christian life; and yet it is promised to none but truly penitent souls. Lost innocence is to be regained by the humble confession of the sin, when it is accompanied by the absolution of the priest; but let the faithful be on their guard against the dangerous error, which would persuade them that they have nothing to do when once pardoned. Let them remember the solemn warning given them by the Holy Ghost in the sacred Scriptures: 'Be not without fear about sin forgiven!'^[5] Our confidence of our having been forgiven should be in proportion to the change or conversion of our heart; the greater our present detestation of our past sins and the more earnest our desire to do penance for them for the rest of our lives, the better founded is our confidence that they have been pardoned. 'Man knoweth not,' as the same holy Volume assures us, 'whether he be worthy of love or hatred';^[6] but he that keeps up within him the spirit of penance, has every reason to hope that God loves him.

But the courageous observance of the Church's precept of fasting and abstaining during Lent must be accompanied by those two other eminently good works, to which God so frequently urges us in the Scripture: prayer and almsdeeds. Just as under the term 'fasting' the Church comprises all kinds of mortification; so under the word 'prayer' she includes all those exercises of piety whereby the soul holds intercourse with her God. More frequent attendance at the services of the Church, assisting daily at Mass, spiritual reading, meditation upon eternal truths and the Passion, hearing sermons, and, above all, approaching the Sacraments of Penance and the holy Eucharist-these are the chief means whereby the faithful should offer to God the homage of prayer, during this holy season.

Almsdeeds comprise all the works of mercy to our neighbor, and are unanimously recommended by the holy doctors of the Church, as being the necessary complement of fasting and prayer during Lent. God has made it a law, to which He has graciously bound Himself, that charity shown towards our fellow-creatures, with the intention of pleasing our Creator, shall be rewarded as though it were done to Himself. How vividly this brings before us the reality and sacredness of the tie which He would have to exist between all men! Such, indeed, is its necessity, that our heavenly Father will not accept the love of any heart that refuses to show mercy: but, on the other hand, He accepts as genuine and as done to Himself the charity of every Christian, who, by a work of mercy shown to a fellow-man, is really acknowledging and honoring that sublime union which makes all men to be one family with God as its Father. Hence it is that almsdeeds, done with this intention, are not merely acts of human kindness, but are raised to the dignity of acts of religion, which have God for their direct object, and have the power of appeasing His divine justice.

Let us remember the counsel given by the Archangel Raphael to Tobias. He was on the point of taking leave of this holy family, and returning to heaven; and these were his words: 'Prayer is good with fasting and alms, more than to lay up treasures of gold: for alms delivereth from death, and the same is that which purgeth away sins, and maketh to find mercy and life everlasting.'[7] Equally strong is the recommendation given to this virtue by the Book of Ecclesiasticus: 'Water quenqueth a flaming fire, and alms resisteth sins.'[8] And again: 'Shut up alms in the heart of the poor, and it shall obtain help for thee against all evil.'[9] The Christian should keep these consoling promises ever before his mind, but more especially during, the season of Lent. The rich man should show the poor, whose whole year is a fast, that there is a time when even he has his self-imposed privations. The faithful observance of Lent naturally produces a saving; let that saving be given to Lazarus. Nothing, surely, could be more opposed to the spirit of this holy season, than keeping up a table as richly and delicately provided as at other periods of the year, when God permits us to use all the comforts compatible with the means He has given us. But how thoroughly Christian is it that, during these days of penance and charity, the life of the poor man should be made more comfortable, in proportion as that of the rich shares in the hardships and privations of his suffering brethren throughout the world! Poor and rich would then present themselves, with all the beauty of fraternal love upon them, at the divine Banquet of the Paschal feast, to which our risen Jesus will invite us after these forty days are over.

There is one means more whereby we are to secure to ourselves the great graces of Lent; it is the spirit of retirement and separation from the world. Our ordinary life, such as it is during the rest of the year, should all be made to pay tribute to the holy season of penance; otherwise, the salutary impression produced on us by the holy ceremony of Ash Wednesday will soon be effaced. The Christian ought, therefore, to forbid himself, during Lent, all the vain amusements, entertainments, and parties, of the world he lives in. As regards theaters and balls, which are the <world> in the very height of its power to do harm, no one that calls himself a disciple of Christ should ever be present at them, unless necessity, or the position he holds in society, oblige him to it: but if, from his own free choice, he throws himself amidst such dangers during the present holy season of penance and recollection, he offers an insult to his character, and must needs cease to believe that he has sins to atone for, and a God to propitiate. The world (we mean that part of it which is Christian) has thrown off all those external indications of mourning and penance, which we read of as being so religiously observed in the ages of faith; let that pass; but there is one thing which can never change: God's justice, and man's obligation to appease that justice. The world may rebel as much as it will against the sentence, but the sentence is irrevocable: 'Unless you do penance, you shall all perish.'[10] It is God's own word. Say, if you will, that few nowadays give ear to it; but for that very reason many are lost. Those, too, who hear this word, must not forget the warnings given them by our divine Savior Himself, in the Gospel read to us on Sexagesima Sunday. He told us how some of the seed is trodden down by the passers- by, or eaten by the fowls of the air; how

some falls on rocky soil, and is parched; and how, again, some is choked by thorns. Let us be wise, and spare no pains to become that good ground, which not only receives the divine seed, but brings forth a hundredfold for the Easter harvest which is at hand.

An unavoidable feeling will arise in the minds of some of our readers, as they peruse these pages, in which we have endeavored to embody the spirit of the Church, such as it is expressed, not only in the liturgy, but also in the decrees of Councils and in the writings of the holy fathers. The feeling we allude to is one of regret at not finding, during this period of the liturgical year, the touching and exquisite poetry, which gave such a charm to the forty days of our Christmas solemnity. First came Septuagesima, throwing its gloomy shade over those enchanting visions of the mystery of Bethlehem; and now we have come into a desert land, with thorns at every step, and no springs of water to refresh us. Let us not complain, however; holy Church knows our true wants, and is intent on supplying them. Neither must we be surprised at her insisting on a severer preparation for Easter, than for Christmas.

At Christmas, we were to approach our Jesus as an Infant; all she put us through then were the Advent exercises, for the mysteries of our Redemption were but beginning.

And of those who went to Jesus' crib, there were many who, like the poor shepherds of Bethlehem, might be called simple, at least in this sense, that they did not sufficiently realize either the holiness of their Incarnate God or the misery and guilt of their own conscience. But now that this Son of the eternal God has entered the path of penance; now that we are about to see Him a victim to every humiliation, and suffering even a death upon a cross, the Church does not spare us; she rouses us from our ignorance and our self-satisfaction. She bids us strike our breasts, have compunction in our souls, mortify our bodies, because we are sinners. Our whole life ought to be one of penance; fervent souls are ever doing penance: could anything be more just or necessary, than that we should do some penance during these days, when our Jesus is fasting in the desert, and is to die on Calvary? There is a sentence of our Redeemer, which He spoke to the daughters of Jerusalem on the day of His Passion; let us apply it to ourselves: 'If in the green wood they do these things, what shall be done in the dry?'[11] Oh, what a revelation is here! And yet, by the mercy of Jesus who speaks it, the dry wood may become the green, and so not be burned.

The Church hopes, nay, she is laboring with her whole energy, that, this may be; therefore, she bids us bear the yoke; she gives us a Lent. Let us only courageously tread the way of penance, and the light will gradually beam upon us. If we are now far off from our God by the sins that are upon us, this holy season will be to us what the saints call the purgative life, and will give us that purity which will enable us to see our Lord in the glory of His victory over death. If, on the contrary, we are already living the illuminative life; if during the three weeks of Septuagesima, we have bravely sounded the depth of our miseries, our Lent will give us a clearer view of Him who is our light, and if we acknowledged Him as our God when we saw Him as the Babe of Bethlehem, our soul's eye will not fail to recognize Him in the divine Penitent of the desert, or in the bleeding Victim of Calvary.

ENDNOTES

1 Ps. cx. 10.

2 St. Matt. iv. 17.

3 St. Luke xiii. 3.

4 Rom. vi. 6.

5 Ecclus. v. 5.

6 Eccles. ix. 1.