

The Necessity of Penance and Conversion

Every Sin Demands Atonement

“What am I to do, child of my heart, when my children turn from me? The false peace of this world lures them and in the end will destroy them. They think they have done enough in consecrating themselves to my Immaculate Heart. It is not enough. That which I ask for and is most important many have not given me. What I ask, have asked, and will continue to ask is reformation of life. There must be sanctification from within. ... Souls who cling to sin cannot have their hands free to receive the treasures of grace that I hold out to them.” This is what Our Lady means when she speaks of reformation, renewal. It is this about which she is so concerned, namely, sanctification from within.

“My sweet child, unless my children reform their lives, they will suffer great persecution. If man himself will not take upon himself the penance necessary to atone for his sins and those of others, God in His justice will have to send upon him the punishment necessary to atone for his transgressions.”

(Sister Mildred Mary Neuzil, *The Diary*, OUR LADY OF AMERICA©, Fostoria, OH, Pgs. 18, 16, 17)

Penance, atonement, is necessary for the forgiveness of sin. When we deny our flesh we break its power over us and free our souls to seek the higher things of heaven and the encounter with the living God who dwells in the depths of our being. In humbling ourselves before God, confessing our sins and our need for forgiveness, we gain God's favor. Sacred Scripture constantly extols the virtue of humility and speaks of the delight God takes in the humble of heart. The First Covenant relates a history of sacrifices in atonement for sin with the blood of animals, but these sacrifices could only signify forgiveness and a more perfect sacrifice yet to come. The New Covenant speaks of God willing His Son to take on the body of our flesh for a perfect immolation of Himself that would accomplish the forgiveness of sin once and for all. Jesus would be the unblemished Lamb laid on the altar of sacrifice, the Perfect Sacrifice offered once that would truly forgive our sins and end the need for any further sacrifice. The Church, the Mystical Christ, baptizes us into Christ's saving death and bids us lay our own lives down on His altar of sacrifice, sharing in that redemptive mission for the salvation of souls, our own and others who might otherwise be lost. This Lenten season of 40 days reminds us of the need to enter into the purification of the desert experience like the Chosen People had done for 40 years before they could enter the Promised Land. Stripped of all that is unnecessary and breaking asunder our idols, we learn to depend on God. Removed from the din of the secular we are able to hear the voice of the Sacred One Who beckons from within.

Discernment! We must be still if we are to discern whose voice is controlling us—the voice of Satan, the voice of our sinful selves, or the voice of God. Everything about our temporal world is just that, temporal, the opposite of all that is eternal and everlasting. Since nothing impure can enter into the Presence of the All Holy One, penance is both necessary and purifying. Moses spent 40 days on Mount Sinai atoning for the people's sins. When God sent Jonah to the people of Nineveh to announce: **“Forty days more and Nineveh shall be destroyed!”** the people heeded his message, put on the sackcloth and ashes of humility and repentance and were then spared the ***cup of God's judgment***. Jeremiah's call to Jerusalem and the kings and nations surrounding it to turn away from sin and back

towards God was not heeded; thus God commanded Jeremiah to deliver ***the cup of His wrath*** foretelling the destruction of Jerusalem and the Babylonian captivity. His message, however, also held ***a cup of blessing***, a promise that after 70 years of exile, God would bring a faithful remnant back to Jerusalem to rebuild the city. The Old Testament is an ongoing story of God's Covenant with His people, His blessing and their rebellion, the call to repentance with the threat of judgment or promise of blessing in accordance with their obedience or refusal to obey the prophets He had sent to save them. The prophet Joel declared:

Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with your whole heart, with fasting, and weeping, and mourning. Rend your hearts, not your garments, and return to the Lord, your God. For gracious and merciful is he, slow to anger, rich in kindness, and relenting in punishment. Perhaps he will again relent and leave behind him a blessing ... (*The New American Bible, Joel 2: 12-14.*)

In the New Covenant John the Baptist preached a baptism of repentance with water, declaring the kingdom of God was at hand. Jesus, too, preached repentance and conversion and undertook a 40 day fast Himself, like Moses, to atone for the sins of the people. He demanded a complete change of heart and submission to the laws of the Supreme God: **"For behold, the kingdom of God is within you."** (Lk 17:21) When the Apostles were baptized with the Holy Spirit, they preached: **"Do penance and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, for the remission of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."** (Acts 2:38) Constantly we are called by the Spirit to confront our sinfulness. If we have stained the white robe of our sacred Baptism, we are exhorted to wash it clean in the blood of Jesus, the Sacrificial Lamb, who offers us ***the cup of His Blood, the cup of salvation.***

Penance is both internal and external. Internal penance demands a hatred for sin and a determination to make amends for our sins. The Sacrament of Reconciliation makes that quite clear, the internal conversion, the external confession, a penance required, and the firm purpose of amendment. The internal penance must be reinforced with external penance to strengthen ourselves against future sin. Since we are social beings, our sins have a social dimension. Our penitence, then, must not only be personal but social as well. St. Paul tells us: **"They who belong to Christ have crucified their flesh with its passions and desires."** (Gal 5:24) St. Augustine states: **"It is not enough for a man to change his ways for the better and to give up the practice of evil, unless by painful penance, sorrowing humility, the sacrifice of a contrite heart and the giving of alms he makes amends to God for all that he has done wrong."** (Sermon, 351)

External penance under the direction of ***inner conversion*** includes ***accepting as the will of God the duties of our state in life and the burdens everyday life imposes upon us.*** These, however, are not enough; we must make ***voluntary acts of penance*** in atonement for our own sins and for the sins of others in our families, our church, and in the whole of mankind, building up the body of Christ, in imitation of Him. The saints have modeled voluntary penance for us, both in its personal and in its social dimensions, but none can model the social dimension of atonement, suffering for the sins of others, as did Jesus and His most holy Mother. Sinless as they themselves were and without need of any atonement, they embraced God's will and a lifetime of tribulations, fasting, and a terrible Passion unique to themselves, to atone for the sins of mankind. That atonement for us, however, does not excuse us, born in sin with the effects of original sin and scarred with

personal sin, from the need for our own personal atonement, achieved through prayer, fasting, and almsgiving, both monetarily and in the form of the spiritual and corporal works of mercy. That atonement by Jesus as our Redeemer and by His Mother as Co-redeemer with Him obliges us to imitate them in making atonement for the sins of others, especially those dear to us and those who would otherwise be lost because of their lack of faith. And contrition. Let us obey our Lord: **"If anyone wishes to come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me."** (Mt 16:24) We are baptized into Christ's death so we may be transformed in the glory of His Resurrection

Therefore the Church -- while it reaffirms the primacy of the religious and supernatural values of penitence (values extremely suitable for restoring to the world today a sense of the presence of God and of His sovereignty over man and a sense of Christ and His salvation) -- invites everyone to accompany the inner conversion of the spirit with the voluntary exercise of external acts of penitence.

(Pope Paul VI, PAENITEMINI, APOSTOLIC CONSTITUTION ON PENANCE, February 19, 1966, Chapter III.)

In his December 20, 1759 encyclical **APPETENTE SACRO - ON THE SPIRITUAL ADVANTAGES OF FASTING**, Pope Clement XIII spoke of **the holy law of fasting** testified to by the law and the prophets, consecrated by Christ and handed on by the apostles and preserved by the Church, calling us to mortification of the flesh and humiliation of the spirit in order to prepare us to enter ever more deeply into the Paschal Mystery.

...penance for the Christian man is not satisfied by withdrawing from sin, by detesting a past life badly lived, or by the sacramental confession of these same sins. Rather, penance also demands that we satisfy divine justice with fasting, almsgiving, prayer, and other works of the spiritual life. Every wrongdoing -- be it large or small -- is fittingly punished, either by the penitent or by a vengeful God. Therefore we cannot avoid God's punishment in any other way than by punishing ourselves. If this teaching is constantly implanted in the minds of the faithful, and if they drink deeply of it, there will be very little cause to fear that those who have discarded their degraded habits and washed their sins clean through sacramental confession would not want to expiate the same sins through fasting, to eliminate the concupiscence of the flesh. (Paragraph 3)

Although mindful of the prophetic voices of the past, let us heed the most prophetic voice for our time, that of the Mother of Jesus, Co-Redeemer with Him in the work of our salvation. Let us heed her warnings to our sinful world, especially to her children in America who honor her as the Immaculate Conception, **Our Lady of America, the Immaculate Virgin.**® She warns that evil is enveloping the world and is particularly focused on America, both from within and without, because of her favor and mandate to America, the United States of America. Let us embrace the reform of life she asks for, tearing sin from the fabric of our hearts and from the soul of America. Let us atone for the sins of our Nation, especially that intrinsic evil of abortion, a sin against nature itself that has resulted in the torture and murder of over 58 million innocent babies in the womb. Their blood has been crying to heaven for justice for years and God is soon to render His judgment upon the world for this sin and all the sins against purity and Faith that are so displeasing to Him.

There can be no peace until justice is served. Let us plead the blood of Jesus on every person and every nation for conversion and salvation.

“My beloved daughter, what I am about to tell you concerns in a particular way my children in America. Unless they do penance by mortification and self-denial and thus reform their lives, God will visit them with punishments hitherto unknown to them. ... There will be peace, as has been promised, but not until my children are purified and cleansed from defilement, and clothed thus with the white garment of grace, are made ready to receive this peace, so long promised and so long held back because of the sins of men.”

“My dear children, either you will do as I desire and reform your lives, or God Himself will need to cleanse you in the fires of untold punishment. You must be prepared to receive His great gift of peace. If you will not prepare yourselves, God will Himself be forced to do so in His justice and mercy.” (Diary, Pg. 21, in 1957.)

“O my child, tell your spiritual father that I come again to warn and to plead. Oh, penance, penance! How little my children understand it! They give me many words, but sacrifice themselves they will not. It is not me they love but themselves. ...See, I weep, but my children show me no compassion. They behold the sword in my heart but will make no move to withdraw it. I give them love; they give me only ingratitude. Weep, then, dear child, weep with your Mother over the sins of men. Intercede with me before the throne of mercy, for sin is overwhelming the world and punishment is not far away.” (Diary, Pg. 34, 1959.)

“Weep, then, dear child, weep with your Mother over the sins of men.”

“

**Copyright© Contemplative Sisters of the Indwelling Trinity, Fostoria, OH,
Lent, February, 2015. Revised 2017.
All rights reserved.**