

PRACTICE DURING LENT



FROM

“THE LITURGICAL YEAR”

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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 into the penitential season that 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. We have said farewell to the vain joys and baubles of the world to ensure our repentance might be earnest and lasting. Our pride has been humbled by the prophecy that our bodies will 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 He seemed to have withdrawn from us during those weeks of Septuagesima, when everything spoke to us of His maledictions upon sinful man, but this absence has done us good.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 that to be the truth: the spirit of penance is now active within us, because we have feared.

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. Here He is—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 the season for doing penance has begun, He comes to cheer us on with His presence and by His own example. We are going to spend forty days fasting and abstaining. Jesus, who is innocence itself, goes through the same penance. For a time, we have separated ourselves 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 to pray more fervently than at other times. Jesus is suppliant and all for us. We will think over our past sins and bewail them in bitter grief. Jesus suffers for our sins and, as though He Himself had committed them, weeps over them in the silence of the desert.

No sooner had He received baptism from the hands of Saint John, than the Holy Ghost led Him to the desert. The time had come to show 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 that had heard His Father's voice proclaiming Him to be God's beloved Son. He leaves them and goes into the desert. A rugged mountain rises not far from the Jordan. It 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. The Son of God now enters a cave on that wild mountain. His

only companions are the dumb animals who have chosen this same cave for their own shelter. He has no food wherewith to satisfy the pangs of hunger; the barren rock can yield Him no drink; and His only bed must be of stone. Here, He is to spend forty days. After the forty days, 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 so we, when called upon to tread the narrow way of our Lenten penance, will have His example to silence the excuses, and sophisms, and repugnances of self-love and pride. The lesson here is given too simply to be misunderstood.

The law of doing penance for sin is also clearly shown and we cannot plead ignorance. Therefore, we must honestly accept and practice the teaching. Jesus leaves the desert where He spent the forty days and addresses all men with these words, "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]

Penance consists of contrition of the soul and mortification of the body; both parts are essential to penance. The soul has willed the sin and the body has frequently cooperated 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. Therefore, there cannot be any thorough Christian life or any earnest penance where the body does not take part, in both, with the soul.

Yet, it is the soul that 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 Saint Peter. The soul, then, must be resolved to give up every sin. The soul must heartily grieve over those she has committed. The soul must hate sin. The soul 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. The 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, 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 is accompanied by fasting and abstinence.

How great, then, is the illusion of those Christians who forget their past sins or who compare themselves with others whose lives they believe are worse than their own. Thus

satisfied with themselves, they can see no harm or danger in the easy life they intend to pass for the rest of their days! They will tell you there is 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? 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 interferes with their occupations, and it is such a change from their ordinary way of living. Besides, many other people are worse than themselves and those people never fast or abstain. 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 cherishes what is still left, by making required Lenten observances easier, year after year. With the hope of maintaining that little and of seeing it strengthen for some better future, the Church 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 children of the Church of whom we speak are quite satisfied that things should be as they are. They 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 examples—all tend to lead men from the observance of Lent. It is sad to hear people giving such reasons for their not fasting or abstaining. Surely, they forget that the very aim of fasting and abstinence is to make their bodies of sin [4] suffer and feel. What will they answer on judgment day, when our Savior shows them how even Turks, the disciples of a gross and sensual religion, had the courage to practice, every year, the austerities of their Ramadan?

These children of the Church will find that their loudest accuser will be their own conduct. 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 that have broken down in the pursuit of pleasures that are, to say the least, frivolous, and usually dangerous, would have kept up all their vigor, if the laws of God and His Church, and not the desire to please the world, had been the guide of their conduct. They treat their non-observance of Lent with such indifference that it never excites the slightest trouble or remorse of conscience. 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 today it is out of the question. 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 is 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? How is it that, in the sixteenth century when the protestants undertook to reform the Church, one of their chief grievances was that she insisted on her children mortifying themselves by fasting and abstinence?

It will be asked, “Are there, then, no lawful dispensations?” We answer that there are and 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 deters us from doing this penance, how shall we ever make expiation for our sins, as expiation is essentially painful to nature. The opinion of our physician that fasting will weaken us, may be false or it may be correct. However, mortification of the flesh is exactly what the Church aims at, knowing that our soul will profit from the body being brought into subjection.

Let us suppose the dispensation is 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 make up for those that 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 our Lord to grant us the grace, next year, of sharing in the merits of our fellow-Christians and of observing those holy practices that 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 invites the faithful to partake in its grand joys, we may then confidently take our place side by side with those who have fasted. We will find that, though our bodily weakness has not permitted us to keep pace with them exteriorly, our heart has been faithful to the spirit of Lent.

Regarding fasting and abstinence, we could still provide many examples of the negligence of so many among us—negligence caused by the modern spirit of self-indulgence! 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 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 from each other. They are not aware that the dispensation from one does not, in any way, include a dispensation from the other. If they have obtained, lawfully or unlawfully, 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. 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 with which the commandments and traditions of the Church are treated.

So far, we have been speaking of the non-observance of Lent as related to individuals and Catholics. Let us now say a few words upon the influence that same non-observance has upon a whole people or nation.

Few social questions have not been ably and spiritedly treated by the public writers of the age, writers who have devoted their talents to the study of political economy. It has often been a matter of surprise to us that they should have overlooked a subject of such deep interest as the results produced on society by the abolition of Lent. That is to say, an institution that, more than any other, keeps 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 insight is needed to see the difference between two nations—one that observes, each year, a forty-days' penance in reparation for the violations committed against the law of God, and another, whose very principles reject all such solemn reparation.

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 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 to maintain the strength of the human frame.

Let the children of the Church courageously observe the Lenten practices of penance. Peace of conscience is essential to Christian life 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. Yet, let the faithful be on their guard against the dangerous error that would persuade them that they have nothing to do 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 in our having been forgiven should be in proportion to the change or conversion of our heart. The greater our present abhorrence of our past sins and the greater 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.

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, under the word "prayer" she includes all those exercises of piety whereby the soul holds intercourse with God. Those exercises include frequent attendance at the services of the Church, assisting at daily Mass, reading spiritual books and information, meditating 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 towards our neighbor and are unanimously recommended by the holy doctors of the Church as the necessary complement to 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 that He wants to see existing between all men! Indeed, it is such a requirement that our heavenly Father will not accept the love of any heart that refuses to show mercy. 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 fellowman, is really acknowledging and honoring that sublime union that 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 they are raised to the dignity of acts of religion, with God as their direct object, and they 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 quencheth 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 always 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 to what the rich share 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. That 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. Theaters and balls are the world's very height of power to do harm. No person who calls himself a disciple of Christ should ever be present at them unless it is a necessity, or the position he holds in society obliges him to it. However, if, from his own free choice, he throws himself amidst such dangers during the holy season of penance and recollection, he offers an insult to his character and must believe he has sins to atone for and a God to appease. The world (we mean the part of it that is Christian) has thrown off all those external indications of mourning and penance that we read of so religiously observed in the ages of faith. Let that pass, but there is one thing that can never change. That is 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 passersby, 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 that not only receives the divine seed but also brings forth a hundredfold for the Easter harvest that is at hand.

An unavoidable feeling will arise in the minds of some of our readers, as they peruse these pages where 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 during this period of the liturgical year at not finding the touching and exquisite poetry that 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 more severe preparation for Easter, than is required for Christmas.

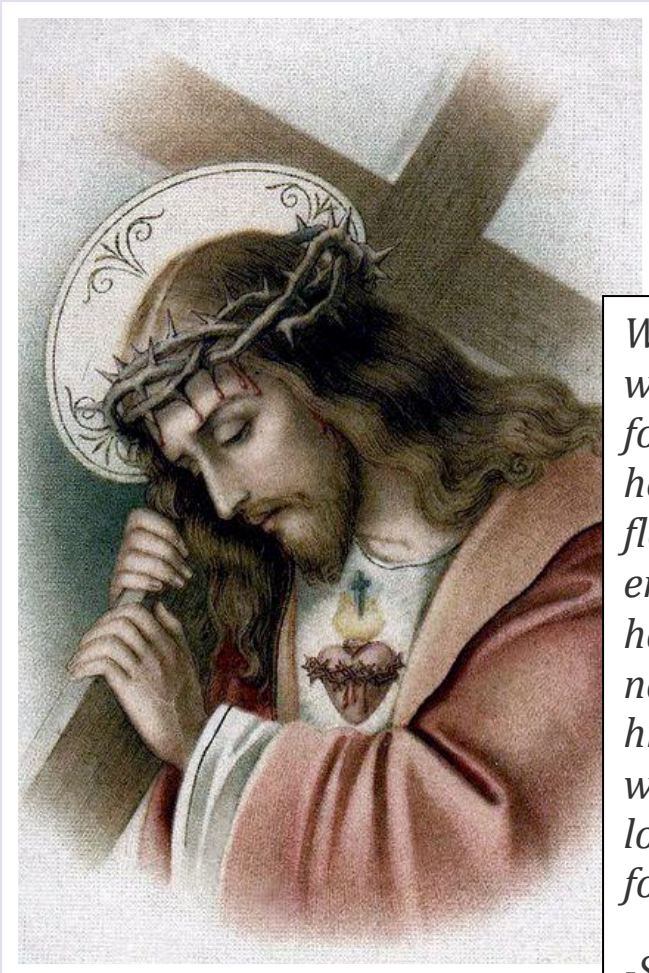
At Christmas, we were to approach our Jesus as an Infant. Then, all the Church put us through were the Advent exercises, for the mysteries of our Redemption were just beginning.

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—they did not sufficiently realize either the holiness of their Incarnate God or the misery and guilt of their own conscience. Now that this Son of the Eternal God has entered the path of penance and 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, and 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 we should do some penance during these days, when our Jesus is fasting in the desert and is to die on Calvary? Our Redeemer spoke a sentence 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! 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 and she gives us a Lent. Let us 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. That purgative life will give us that purity to help us see our Lord in the glory of His victory over death. On the contrary, if we are already living the illuminative life, and 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. 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.

END NOTES

1. Ps. cx. 10.
2. Matt. iv. 17.
3. Luke xiii. 3.
4. Rom. vi. 6.
5. Ecclus. v. 5.
6. Eccles. ix. 1.
7. Tobit xii. 8-9
8. Eccles. iii. 33.
9. Eccles. xxix. 15.
10. Luke xiii. 3.
11. Luke xxiii. 31.



Who will not love this heart so wounded? Who will not return love for love? Who will not embrace a heart so pure? We, who are made of flesh, will repay love with love. We will embrace our wounded one, whose hands and feet ungodly men have nailed; we will cling to his side and to his heart. Let us pray that we be worthy of linking our heart with his love and of wounding it with a lance, for it is still hard and impenitent.

-Saint Bonaventure-



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