

V2_1st_after_Christmas= The Reasonableness of Works of Penance for All Christians
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U.I.O.G.D.

Ave Maria!

Jesus, Mary, Joseph, we love You, save souls
O God come to our assistance. Jesus, Mary, Joseph please make haste to help us!

+ + + Jesus, Mary, Joseph + + +

Volume two = The Penitent Christian
Sunday in the Octave of Christmas Day.

The Reasonableness of Works of Penance for All Christians

“This Child is set for the fall and for the resurrection of many in Israel, and for a sign which shall be contradicted.” St. Luke 2: 34.

Hardly is the Saviour of the world born, when the contradictions and sufferings that were in store for him are predicted by Simeon: “He is set for a sign which shall be contradicted.” Already, too, is addressed to Mary the terrible prophecy, later to be fulfilled in the Passion and death of her divine Son: “And thy own soul a sword shall pierce.” Ah! yes, my dear brethren, from the Crib to the Cross, the life of the innocent Son of God is one unbroken chain of the most severe penances and mortifications. And shall we, his followers, shrink from sufferings, and treat our flesh so delicately? Sinners that we are, deserving of hellfire, and liable through weakness, to relapse at any moment into past crimes, have we not reason to fear, if we cease doing penance, that we shall be amongst the vast number of those unhappy ones for whose “fall” (as the prophet foretold) this divine child of Bethlehem “is set”? Heaven forbid, my dear brethren! If what you have already heard has not convinced you of the necessity for all Christians to do penance,—reflect still further to-day on these two reasonable points:

I. That as Christians we live under a suffering and mortified God and therefore,

II. We must imitate Him in suffering and mortification.

I. What are we mortals on this earth, my dear brethren? “We are members one of another” (Eph.4: 25), says St. Paul; we constitute the moral body of the Catholic Church under one head. What Head is that? “Know you not,” asks St. Paul again, “that your bodies are the members of Christ?” (I Cor. 6:15.) “We may in all things grow up in him, who is the head, even Christ” (Eph. 4: 15). But of what kind is this Head?

Give a short glance at the whole life of Jesus Christ. He was born in a miserable stable, and was laid in a manger instead of a bed. He suffered in his circumcision, when, as a little child only a week old, he shed his blood. He suffered in the flight into Egypt, in which, in addition to the discomforts he had to endure, he was persecuted by his own creatures. He suffered during the thirty years of his hidden life in the poor little cottage of Nazareth, unknown to the world, yielding his will to obedience, and earning his bread by the sweat of his brow, as a poor carpenter’s apprentice. He suffered during the last three years of his life, when, after a fast of forty days and nights, he went on foot from one town to the other, in heat and cold, in rain and wind, preaching and teaching. Many a night he spent in vigils, as the Gospel says of him: “He passed the whole night in the prayer of God” (St. Luke 6: 12). Many a time he slept on the bare ground; many a time wearied with his journeys, he sat down on a hard stone to rest himself; while he often begged from others food and drink when he was hungry and thirsty, sought hospitality at the hands of strangers, and even asked them for a drink of water.

And Oh! what did he not suffer in the last days of his bitter Passion! He was truly “a Man of sorrows.” He was bound with ropes as a malefactor; he was goaded along with blows and buffets; he was crowned with sharp thorns piercing even to the brain; he was scourged with whips: and at last, nailed hand and foot to the cross, hanging thereon for three hours in his terrible death-agony, there was not a member of his body that had not its own most piercing pain to endure ; not one of his exterior senses that was not tortured in the most excruciating manner; his eyes were swollen and bloodshot; his ears were afflicted by the horrible blasphemies and curses that were uttered around him his taste was tortured by the gall and vinegar that were given him to drink, while the sense of feeling was afflicted most grievously in every part of his sacred body. He fulfilled, in short, all the conditions of true penance as if he were a penitent sinner. What a bitter examination of conscience he made in the Garden of Gethsemani when he reviewed, considered and foresaw all the past, present, and future sins of the whole world! What perfect Contrition he had for those sins when he was sorrowful even unto death, shedding as it were, tears of blood for them, through every one of his sacred pores! What a humble confession he made, when, laden with the huge burden of our iniquities, he stood before his judge, like a convicted criminal, to hear the sentence that condemned him to the cross? What severe penance and satisfaction he offered for those sins, when he suffered the atrocious tortures of his shameful death? And all this he endured, although perfectly innocent, partly in order to show us how to do penance for our sins, how to confess them, and how to satisfy for them; and partly in order to show us the right road to heaven, which can be gained only by a holy violence.

What sort of members suit such a Head as this? Compare a voluptuous Christian, who can neither bear temporal trials with patience, nor mortify or overcome himself, with our Saviour and his life? Behold a Head crowned with sharp thorns, while the feet are resting on a cushion of roses; a Head emaciated with hunger and thirst, and a body sleek and well-conditioned; a Head deformed and swollen with blows, and a body clothed in costly array! Christ in the extreme of poverty, and the Christian in abundance and luxury. Christ in labor and trials, and the Christian in comfort and affluence! Christ quenching his thirst with gall and vinegar, and the Christian glutting himself with the costliest liquors and viands! Christ on the hard wood of the cross, and the Christian on a soft down bed. Innocence doing penance, and the sinner indulging his sensuality! Could a greater contrast be found? How can an immortal man dare to take the crucifix in his hand, or look on it without blushing? Even the dumb image reproves him. "Yes," it says to him, "you are, indeed, a fine Christian! I, your God, am hanging here on the cross, and you are bent on enjoying yourself. I am doing penance for your sins, and you think it is enough to merely declare them in confession, without taking any further trouble about them. I must suffer, and thereby enter into my glory; while you imagine you can be driven comfortably into heaven, in a coach and four!"

What a piercing reproof! Learn, Christians, that even the most innocent souls must do penance in order to be conformed to their divine Model, Christ. When Hannibal, the great Carthaginian hero, was crossing the Alps to advance with his great army upon Rome, seeing the terrible risk and loss of life, some of his soldiers began to murmur and complain. Seeing this, he mounted a high rock and harangued them, in a loud voice, reproaching them for their want of courage, and concluding with these words: "Recollect that you are not going before Hannibal, but following him." I go before you to show you the way; I am the first to climb the rugged mountains. This short exhortation encouraged the soldiers to follow him boldly.

A similar instance is narrated in the First Book of Machabees, Simon Machabees, the Jewish general, was advancing with twenty thousand men to attack the vast forces of the enemy (Mach. 16: 5). Between the opposing armies there was a running river, which the soldiers hesitated to cross. What did Simon do? "He saw that the people were afraid to go over the river, so he went over first" (Ibid. 6). Without saying a word to them, he set spurs to his horse, and crossed the river at once. "Then the men, seeing him, passed over after him" (Ibid.).

If we had been present on the occasion, my dear brethren, and had seen regiment after regiment following their leader's example, and crossing the river with their officers, while a few of the common soldiers remained behind on the bank, afraid to wet their feet, would we not have cried out to the latter: "Cowards that you are! Are your lives more valuable than those of your general and his brave officers?" Delicate, voluptuous Christians, think of yourselves, and blush! You tremble at the bare idea of crosses and sufferings, fasting and disciplines, self-denial and mortification of the flesh! We too have enemies to combat. They attack us on all sides without intermission, the cunning demon, the perverse world,

and our own corrupt flesh; and if we give way to them, we are lost. Certainly it is sometimes hard to fight them. We have to cross a running, river; but Jesus Christ, our sovereign Lord and General, precedes us, crowned with thorns, bearing the marks of the nails and scourges, and crying out to us, "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me" (St. Luke 9: 23). Christ is not following you, but going on before you. He is the first to bear the cross, and his cross is the heaviest of all. He first crossed the river of extreme poverty and humiliation, of bitter suffering, self-denial and mortification, and men seeing him (as they see him still by the light of faith), have

II. "Passed over after him." So, have followed him, the men and women of strict Religious Orders, who live in voluntary poverty, denying themselves all lawful pleasures, that they may spend their lives in frequent prayer and vigils, and unceasing mortification of their bodies. So have followed him the innocent and the penitent of all ages and sexes, treating themselves with the greatest severity, so as to resemble more closely their suffering, crucified God. And can there be a Christian so cowardly, so degenerate as to refuse to follow his Lord and God at least at a distance, by voluntarily taking up his cross and mortifying himself? "For shame," says St. Bernard, "to be a delicate member under a Head crowned with thorns!"

Hear what the Council of Trent says: "The life of a Christian should be a perpetual penance." It must necessarily be so; there is no other way to heaven than that by which Jesus Christ has gone there before us, and which he has taught us by his example. "He that taketh not up his cross and followeth me," he has said, "is not worthy of me" (St. Matthew 10:38). And again: "I am the door" (St. John 10: 9). He who does not enter through me, cannot have eternal life. "What," asks St. Augustine, "is meant by entering through Christ?" And he answers: "It means to imitate the life of Christ," to walk in the path wherein he walked. St. Paul too expressly teaches that: "Whom he foreknew, he also predestinated to be made conformable to the image of his Son; that he might be the firstborn amongst many brethren" (Rom. 8: 29). Why does St. Paul say that we must be "made conformable to the image" of the Son of God? There is a great difference, my dear brethren, between an artist who looks at a picture in order to copy it, and an art-dealer who merely wishes to buy the picture, or simply to admire it. The latter runs his eyes two or three times over it, and admires the skill of the painter. "That is a beautiful picture," he says; and buying it, he brings it home, and hangs it on the wall of his room. That is all. The former, on the other hand, intending to copy the picture, looks at it critically a hundred times on all sides. Nor is he satisfied with that. He takes his brush, and every time he makes a stroke with it, he looks at the picture again, so as to be sure of accurately reproducing every line of it. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is a picture that we must not merely look at and admire. If that were all that is necessary to salvation, all Catholics would be amongst the elect. Hardly is there one who has not a crucifix in his house, which he looks at now and then. Hardly one, who is not struck with admiration when he reads or hears of the penitent and suffering life of our Lord. But this is not enough. Christ is our

great Model. We must copy him closely in our lives and actions. “Look, and make it according to the pattern, that was shown thee on the mount” (Exod. 25: 40). Cast your eyes on this picture, O man! but not only look at it. Set your hand to work, to imitate the example that was shown you on Calvary.

Poor, suffering Christians, who have to labor hard in order to earn your daily bread, or who are oppressed by sickness, suffering and persecution, what a consolation it is for you, if you are only in the state of grace, to be able to bear your daily crosses and trials with patience, and to offer them to God, your friend, by a supernatural intention. Rejoice and be glad in the Lord; for he imprints daily on your soul the beautiful image of his crucified Son, and makes up for the penances that you should otherwise have inflicted on yourselves. If you sometimes find your trials hard to bear, so that weak nature cries out against them, take the crucifix in your hands, and say to yourselves: See, here is my God hanging on the shameful cross, the Holy of Holies suffering even unto death; why should not I, then, a sinner, be willing to suffer with him? I, who cannot gain heaven in any other way, why should I not bear patiently for a short time the light cross that is laid on my shoulders? For by doing so I shall become like to the image of the Son of God, and shall receive the surest pledge of being amongst the chosen children of God.

But, urges some poor sufferer: I do not suffer of my own free will, nor with patience. I am always conscious of a repugnance and dislike for suffering. I am incapable of doing any good work, or even of saying my usual prayers. Occasionally, I make an effort to resign myself to the divine will, but I remain just as discontented as before I have no pleasure in the cross, and, if I could, I would free myself from it altogether. How is it, then, possible for me to merit under such circumstances? O simple souls, do you not know that your present state makes you thoroughly conformable to the image of Jesus Christ crucified? Tell me, O most merciful Saviour, Pattern and Model of all who suffer and are truly penitent, tell me, for the instruction of these complaining souls,—didst thou thyself prepare the heavy cross thou didst carry on thy own shoulders up the hill of Calvary? Didst thou fasten thyself to it with thy own hands? No, the envious Jews and impious executioners prepared it for me, and made me carry it. My heavenly Father ordained that I should receive it from my bitterest enemies, and therefore, through obedience, I allowed myself to be crucified thereon. And, didst thou, O Lord, feel no dislike or repugnance to the cross? Certainly, I did, so much so, that the bare thought of it made me tremble with fear and anguish in the Garden of Gethsemani, until I sweated blood, and, lying on the ground in anguish, thrice besought my heavenly Father, if it might be done, to take from me that bitter chalice of suffering, and save me from that cruel death. Such aridity of spirit did I suffer, and such extreme desolation of soul, that, while I was hanging on the cross, I openly complained before heaven and earth of having been abandoned by my heavenly Father: “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (St. Matthew 27:46.)

Tremble, ye luxurious and effeminate children of the world! You have sinned often and grievously, and have frequently merited hell; yet you still continue to sin, and increase your torments for all eternity. You honor your crucified God with the lips only, while you

pamper your bodies and indulge your senses in every possible way, in idleness, comfort, and pleasure. What share, degenerate members, can you expect in your thorn-crowned Head? What else can you expect, but that woe which Christ pronounced on the rich and voluptuous: “Woe to you that are rich, for you have your consolation” (St. Luke 6: 24). “Woe to you that are filled, for you shall hunger” (Ibid. 25). “Woe to you that now laugh, for you shall mourn and weep” (Ibid.).

I beseech of you, resolve in time to lead a life of penance. From this out, in all the difficulties, annoyances, discomforts, and trials that arise from your state of life, your employment, the change of the seasons and the weather, your own weakness and delicacy of constitution, or those that others cause you, or that God himself sends you according to his own good will and pleasure, and which you can neither avoid nor change, determine to bear all crosses patiently and humbly for God’s sake and to gain heaven, Secondly, as you are bound to do in any case, avoid those pleasures which you cannot enjoy without exposing your soul to danger, and undertake those mortifications of the outward senses or inward appetites that are necessary or helpful to avoid sin. Finally, deny yourself from time to time even lawful pleasures and gratifications. In many things do violence to yourself, and sometimes chastise your body by penitential works, that you may prove by your life and actions that you are a true Catholic and a real member of the thorn-crowned Head, that you truly adore a God who suffered and was crucified for you. Make this resolve with me, my dear brethren, not merely for to-day, but for your whole lives. “If we suffer with him, we shall be also glorified with him” (Rom. 8: 17). Amen.

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