

V2_20th_after_Pentecost= Gratitude for the Benefit of Penance
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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
TWENTIETH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Gratitude for the Benefit of Penance

“Thy son liveth; and himself believed, and his whole house.” St. John 4: 53.

This man only required to hear the words: “Thy son liveth,” thy son, who was at the point of death, is now alive and well; and behold he himself believed, and his whole house with him. How comes it, that similar and even far greater benefits are daily conferred on us—for there are few among us who have not experienced like wonderful effects of the divine goodness—and yet we hardly think anything of them! Whenever one is absolved from mortal sin in sacramental confession, God says to him, “thy soul,” that was dead, “liveth.” That benefit (which is almost the greatest of all), is the one for which we return the least thanks to God. We do not value it as we ought. To-day, I shall try to show that awakening of the soul from the death of sin is one of God’s greatest benefits to us:

I. *In itself, and*

II. *In the manner in which God bestows it on us.*

I. When a convalescent, who has been dangerously ill, compares with his past grievous pains the agreeable change and the bodily comfort he now experiences, he is forced to cry out, in the joy of his heart, infinite thanks be to the good God! What a great benefit he has bestowed on me, in raising me up from my bed of suffering, and restoring me to health! In the same way, repentant sinners, when you remember the unhappy state of your souls while you were living in sin, and compare it with the wonderful and happy change wrought by the grace of sacramental absolution, you may reasonably conclude that the forgiveness of sin is an extraordinarily great benefit, for which one can never be grateful enough to God during his whole life.

Come with me in imagination to the court of Constantinople, and see what happened there in former times. Michael Balbus, an illustrious prince and minister of the emperor Leo, was accused, and found guilty of having conspired against the emperor. He was thrown into prison and was condemned to be burnt alive. It happened to be at Christmas time that he was led out to execution, and the empress Theodosia, seeing the miserable state of the unhappy prince, and influenced, too, by a feeling of reverence for the holy season, fell at the emperor’s feet, and earnestly besought him not to sully the great festival by

such a horrible tragedy. Leo was displeased at her request, but consented to put off the execution till after the festival. What happened? On the eve of the day appointed for the guilty man's execution, Leo died, and Michael Balbus was brought forth from prison and proclaimed emperor. As they could not find the keys to unlock the chains wherewith he was bound, they placed him on the throne fettered as he was, and on the following day he was solemnly crowned in the church of St. Sophia. What a wonderful change that was for him! From a prison to a throne, from fetters to a crown, from the fire, in which he was on the point of being burnt alive, to the highest glory of the empire. Who could describe the joy of that prince at such a sudden and miraculous change of fortune? Could he ever have been sufficiently grateful to her who was the cause of it? But, great as was his good fortune it is but a shadow compared to that of the human soul, freed by grace from the state of sin and again received by God into favor.

By sanctifying grace received in Baptism, O sinner! You were made a prince and an heir of the kingdom of heaven, an intimate friend of the sovereign God; but when you rebelled against God, by mortal sin, you became in an instant, a rebel guilty of high treason, and sentenced to everlasting damnation in the fire of hell. Who prevented the execution of that sentence? Who but the Empress of heaven, most holy Mary, who persuaded her Divine Son to look on you with eyes of pity, and allow his enraged justice to give you a little more time. "Unless the Lord had been my helper," you may well say, with thankful heart, like the penitent David, "my soul had almost dwelt in hell" (Ps. 3:17). God forestalled you with his grace, touched and softened your heart, so that you repented of your sins, confessed them, and received absolution.

How great and marvelous was the change that then took place in you! Delivered from the bonds of the foul fiend, generously clothed by God with the costly robe of sanctifying grace, adorned with his divine gifts and supernatural virtues, and reinstated in all your lost merits, you were placed, so to speak, on the divine throne, as a beloved child of God and a lawful heir of the kingdom of heaven, to whom the crown of honor and glory belongs as a right, that you may reign with God forever. Tell me, O sinner! What were your feelings when this wonderful change was wrought in you? How were you able to contain yourself for sudden joy? Could you ever forget such a great benefit? Is it possible that you do not openly confess that you are eternally bound to your God, and that you owe him therefore a debt of the greatest gratitude?

Our creation is, as we must acknowledge, a great benefit on the part of God. In preference to countless creatures, which he left to their nothingness, he has drawn us forth from nothing and given us this temporal life. But what is the gift of creation compared to that divine goodness which has rescued our dead souls from the jaws of hell, and restored them to eternal life? By the temporal life of the body God has opened to us the door to the transitory goods of this earth, which are accompanied by many annoyances and contradictions; but with the spiritual life of the soul, he has reopened to us the door to eternal, heavenly goods, which had been closed against us by our sins.

Again, what do we not owe Jesus Christ, for the inestimable grace of redemption? For our salvation, the Son of God descended from the throne of his heavenly glory, became man like us, spent thirty-three years in poverty, and finally sacrificed himself for us completely, dying the bitter death of the cross. If we had a hundred thousand lives at our disposal, and gave them all up to our Lord Jesus Christ out of gratitude, we should still fail to make him an adequate return; and yet this redemption was but a means to the forgiveness of sin, without which the offended justice of God could not have been fully satisfied for even one mortal sin. The justification of the sinner was the chief end of that redemption, which cost the innocent Son of God so much that, in order to accomplish it according to the will of his heavenly Father, he had to suffer and die. "Who was delivered up for our sins," says St. Paul to the Romans, "and rose again for our justification" (Rom. 4: 25).

In order to see the greatness of this benefit, read the Gospel, and there find that Jesus Christ makes more account of the conversion of a sinner, than of raising the dead. After raising Lazarus from the dead who had been four days in the grave, he allowed him at once to go away. When he raised the son of the widow of Naim, "He gave him to his mother" (Luke 7: 15). We read in today's Gospel, that he raised the ruler's son without even deigning to go into his house, although he was implored to do so. "Go thy way,"

he said to the father, “thy son liveth” (John 4: 46). On the other hand, when he cast an eye of mercy on the sinner Matthew, whose heart he had softened and converted to penance, he did not say: “Go thy way,” but “Follow me.” When he converted the public sinner Zachaeus, he said: “Make haste and come down; for this day I must abide in thy house.” “This day, is salvation come to this house. For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost” (Luke 19:5, 9, 10). These words he never addressed to those whom he had healed or raised from the dead.

Why this difference? One might reasonably imagine that he would keep the latter constantly at his side, in proof of his Almighty power before the people, but he derives far more honor and glory from the soul that has risen from the grave of sin than from the body that was restored to temporal life. In the conversion of the sinner, God manifests not only his goodness and mercy, but also his omnipotence, and that, too, far more than in the raising of the dead. A dead body cannot resist his will, he can do with it what he pleases; but a sinner, whose soul is dead, has full liberty, either to obey divine grace or to resist it, and therefore often opposes his holy will. Hence God must, so to speak, use more power in order to win the sinner’s heart; consequently, “The triumph of the Lord is the justification of a sinner.” And how often, O man, has not that benefit been bestowed on you and me? If we wish to see further what a debt of gratitude we owe therefore to God, let us consider

II. The manner in which he confers it on us.

Not every one has the power to do good to others; but what better am I, if he who can help me, has not the will to do so? In the Gospel, we have an instance of one doing good against his will, in the man who, conquered by the importunity of his neighbor, got out of his bed at night to give him the required loaves of bread. The best quality of a benefit is the willingness and readiness with which it is conferred. A service obtained only by dint of hard begging is not valued much by the world, and still less by God. Hence, the Apostle St. Paul warns us, that “God loveth a cheerful giver” (2 Cor. 9: 7).

It is this which renders still more excellent the great and wonderful benefit of the forgiveness of sin. God bestows it with the greatest willingness and readiness. It is a source of joy to him if the sinner is only willing to accept it; and, in fact, he rejoices more therein, than in giving graces to his beloved children, to innocent and pious souls, as we learn from the testimony of Christ himself. After having described the joy of the shepherd who has found the lost sheep, he adds: “I say to you that even so there shall be joy in heaven upon one sinner that doth penance, more than upon ninety-nine just who need not penance” (Luke 15: 7).

God confers this benefit on every sinner who earnestly desires it, no matter how many or grievous his sins are. No one who implores that grace is rejected by God, as long as life lasts. Never does the sinner come too late to receive forgiveness. According to St. Augustine, Jesus Christ was pleased to leave us a loving proof of this when he hung dead upon the cross. “One of the soldiers with a spear opened his side” (John 19: 34). Why was his side opened? Did the soldiers wish to assure themselves of his death? No, for they knew already that he was dead: “But after they were come to Jesus, when they saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs” (Ibid. 33); “but one of the soldiers with a spear opened his side.” What, then, is the meaning of the mystery? There is a great difference between a wound inflicted on a living body, and a wound inflicted on a corpse. In the living body, the wound closes again in time; but no medicine or care can close the wound of a dead body. Now, the wound in the Heart of Jesus is an ever-open door, always ready to admit penitent sinners. Therefore, Christ wished to receive it, not while in life, but after death, so that it could never be healed, and that all sinners might, at all times, find the door of mercy and forgiveness open to them.

Lastly, God bestows this great benefit before the sinner asks for it, nay, before he even thinks of it. For the sinner must always be prevented by the divine inspirations, in order to desire and ask for the grace of repentance and forgiveness. We have a beautiful example of this in the Acts of the Apostles. As St. Peter and St. John went to the Temple, one day, they saw sitting before the gate, a man who had been a cripple from his birth. “He, when he had seen Peter and John about to go into the temple, asked to receive an alms” (Acts 3: 3). He knew well, that they were disciples of Christ, and he believed that they had the

power of working miracles. But he did not ask them to heal him; such a thought never entered his head. He was suffering a twofold trial, poverty and lameness; and, no doubt, the latter was worse than the former; for it is better to be poor than to be a cripple. Why, then, did he not beg to be freed from the greater evil, from his lameness? Yet he got what he did not ask for, for Peter said to him: "Silver and gold I have none, but what I have I give thee: In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, arise and walk; and he, leaping up, stood and walked" (Ibid. 6). What a sudden joy filled his heart at the great and unexpected benefit he received, instead of the trifling alms he had asked for. "He went with them into the temple, walking and leaping, and praising God" (Ibid. 8). Sinner, look back on the past; did not the same thing happen to you, as to this cripple? When you were still in the state of sin, what was the end of your desires and wishes? Ah, you were begging for a worthless alms from some creature, for a miserable and momentary carnal pleasure, for the vain esteem and good opinion of men, or for some wretched gain, or satisfaction. Your most important business was to see that it was restored to health, freed from its miseries, saved from hell, and placed on the right road to heaven. But you never even thought of that; your vicious habits had made you insensible to such things. Many and many a time you went into the church without feeling the least desire for the grace of repentance and conversion. God thought of your salvation, and had in readiness for you the wonderful benefit of forgiveness. And what did God ask from us in return? A penitent sigh, "I have sinned; I am sorry for what I have done." The candid, contrite confession of our misdeeds to a man like ourselves in the confessional was enough to induce him to remit the guilt of our sins and the eternal punishment due them.

And now we can rejoice and say, with David: "Our soul hath been delivered as a sparrow out of the snare of the fowlers. The snare is broken and we are delivered" (Ps. 123: 7). What shall I render to the Lord?" (Ps. 115: 12). What return shall we make our benefactor? Tell me, O sinner. I ask myself and you, too, if the just God had taken us out of the world immediately after we had committed our last mortal sin, where would our poor soul be this moment? In hell, without any hope of release. Now let us suppose an impossible case: If God should recall a lost soul to life, deliver it from eternal torments, and promise it a happy eternity, what return would it make him? What gratitude would it not show him? Now, is not this precisely the same benefit which he bestows on us, when he forgives our sins? Nay, the latter is even a greater benefit, for he does not condemn us to hell, as we have deserved, but forgives us without sending us there.

What do we not owe God? What return can we make him? That of never offending him again? No, that is too small a return for us to make! What, then, shall we do? Love him with all our heart? Yes, that is all we can do for him; and that we should be determined to do, as long as he permits us to live. "The mercies of the Lord I will sing forever" (Ps. 88: 2). Amen.

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