

# LENTEN PENANCE

By WILLIAM YEOMANS

RECENT years have seen a relaxing of the general penitential discipline of the Church during Lent. Gone are the rigorous fasts of former years, gone too is the additional abstinence. Does this mean that the Church no longer believes in lenten penance? Or are we to conclude that modern man is incapable of doing penance? Such answers are obviously unacceptable in the light of the Church's constant insistence on the necessity of penance. The mitigation of the laws concerning lenten penance is not a sign that the Church has abandoned penance. It is rather an indication that she does not want us to think of penance merely in terms of particular types of penance. It is true that the majority of people have a legitimate excuse for not fasting, but there can never be a legitimate excuse for not doing penance.

Christ Our Lord proposed penance not as an option but as a necessity. There is no compromise in the words: 'Unless a man deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me he cannot be my disciple'. It is impossible to reject the cross and keep Christ. Indeed it is the very presence of Christ which reveals the need for penance: because 'the Kingdom of God is near at hand' we must 'repent and believe the Gospel'.<sup>1</sup> A right understanding of what penance is and of why it is an integral part of the Christian life can come only by situating penance in the context of the work of salvation accomplished in Christ.

When the Church calls upon all Christians to enter courageously into 'this time of Christian warfare' which is Lent, she does not inculcate the doing of penance as an end in itself. Nor does she make of penance the unique object of Lent. Lent as a time of preparation and penance is but one of its constituent elements. Lent must not be separated from Easter. Historically it was the feast of Easter which led to the institution of the period we call Lent. Theologically too it is the Resurrection which gives meaning to the death of Christ. It is because Christ is risen that we can contemplate His sufferings and death without losing heart. The Christian God is not merely the dying God of Calvary but the risen glorious Christ who gives

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<sup>1</sup> Mk 1,15.

His followers His divine life. If the Christian faith culminated in the death of its founder it would be vain and worthless. The dead Christ would be a noble example of self-sacrifice but no more. The Resurrection reveals His death as the way towards a fuller life, as a victory over what seemed to be invincible. The Gospel narrative of the Risen life reveals Christ still as full of loving kindness in the days of His triumph, as He was during the days of His humiliation. The *propter nos homines* of the *Credo* governs the whole of what follows – the Incarnation, Death and Resurrection, and Ascension is on our account and for our benefit. The victory of Christ is ours because He is for us. His risen life is for our benefit, the gift he came to give us in order that we may become children of God. The prospect of sharing in that divine life in Christ reveals the true nature of penance. Penance is not a road which ends in death but a way into life. Like every authentic constituent of the Christian life it must have primarily a positive, constructive value. For as St. Paul repeats so insistently Christ died to death not to life, and gave death a positive value making of it a beginning, not an end – ‘O death where is thy victory?’<sup>1</sup> Christ made a prisoner of the captivity of death and thus liberated those who lived in the gloomy shadow of its domination. Sharing in Christ’s death then, can only mean increasing our capacity for living with him; it is the way towards freedom and the realisation of our full stature as children of God.

This mystery of death and life marks our entrance into the Church of God. We are baptised into the death of Christ and rise with Him from the waters of baptism. The liturgy of the blessing of the baptismal water depicts the Christian emerging newly-born from the fertile womb of the Church. A new child is born to the Father in Christ by the power of the Spirit. Thus man is caught up into the divine life of the Trinity, an adopted son of God. But this newness of life is also a dedication to a new way of living. The Christian pledges himself to renounce Satan and ‘serve God faithfully in the Holy, Catholic Church’. He begins to live according to the Spirit, that same Spirit of love by Whom the Father created and re-created him, in Whom he prays, and by Whom he is moulded more closely to the likeness of the unique Beloved Son. This ‘spiritual’ life is then essentially a life of love lived according to Christ. It is a giving of oneself to the Father, through the Son, in

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Cor 15,55.

the Spirit, a constant affirmation in action of sonship, fellowship and love. But all this is only possible through Christ, God and man, the one Mediator and high Priest between heaven and earth. It is Christ who communicates to us the Spirit and Who is the way back to our heavenly Father. Becoming a Christian is a passage from death to life, from the isolation of sin to the family of God, from the coldness of selfishness to the warmth of love. This is the reality signified and brought about by Christian baptism.

Baptism is then a real death and resurrection. The Christian emerges from its waters as one of the saved, one who belongs to God's household. He must now live according to his status of an adopted son of the God who is love. His whole life must be ordered in charity 'upon the model of that charity which Christ showed to us when He gave Himself up on our behalf, a sacrifice breathing out fragrance as He offered it to God'.<sup>1</sup> With Christ the Christian must rejoice that he lives in God and is called to reveal the mystery of God's saving love for mankind. Holiness is not an option for the Christian. He must be holy because God is holy. He does not paint for himself a picture of what he would like to be and then live up to it. The image and likeness to which he is fashioned and into which he grows continually is that of the Son of God. The force which moulds him into that likeness is none other than the infinite creative and vivifying power of God. Christian virtue is not a manifestation of personal strength of will. Nor can the motive behind Christian living be an egoistical dissatisfaction with one's own failings, a disappointment with self. The Christian's reaction to his life will always be - 'He that is mighty has done great things for me'. His true inspiration can only be the desire to see the glory of God made known to men - 'so let your light shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven'.<sup>2</sup> In this spirit we seek the pardon of God for our sins and ask Him to free us in His mercy so that He may be glorified.<sup>3</sup>

Penance then, since it is the way to the glory of the Resurrection, cannot be inspired by any ethical considerations of self-control. It is not meant to produce that sentiment of satisfaction with our own will power which inevitably leads to a 'holier-than-thou' attitude. Christian penance finds its inspiration in the longing to see the glory of God made known to men and the consequent detestation of the disorder of sin which obscures the vision of the love of God. At the

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<sup>1</sup> Eph 5,2.    <sup>2</sup> Mt 5,16.    <sup>3</sup> Ember Wk in Lent. Sat 4th Coll.

same time it is evident that only the power of God can show forth His glory, and consequently only by the divine strength can man do penance. Penance is a manifestation not of personal will power but of the divine creative power, renewing man from within. The desire to do penance must come from an attitude of adoration before the might of God who can do all things and without whom we can do nothing. The stronger our desire for God the more easily will we see the need for penance. It was the sight of the Holy God which made Isaias realise that he was 'a man of unclean lips'.<sup>1</sup> Union with God demands a purification from sin and that can only mean penance. Furthermore the God Who inspires our desire for Him will Himself consume in the fire of His love the impurities which cloud our vision of Him and adulterate our desire. Penance will always be a constant of our life on earth since only in the final consummation will all things return to their source in the glorious union of the whole of creation in Christ.

The whole period of Lent is then a preparation for the Resurrection, 'the Paschal Feast upon which all the mysteries of our religion converge'.<sup>2</sup> That prospect of joy cannot be devoid of joy and the 'rejoice always' of the Saturday Epistle of the first week in Lent and of Laetare Sunday summarises the spirit in which the preparation is made. When we fast we are not to be 'as the hypocrites sad'.<sup>3</sup> The Christian fasts not before other men, not even before himself but before God. The attention of the penitent is fastened in loving and joyful confidence upon God - 'Our eyes too are fixed on the Lord our God waiting for him to show mercy on us'.<sup>4</sup> Gloom, despondency and depression have nothing to do with penance. The God to Whom the penitent turns does not seek the death of the sinner but his conversion. He is a God who turns a blind eye to sin and looks only at the desires to get rid of sin. Penance can only be undertaken in this spirit of trust which is founded on unshakable faith in the efficacy of Christ's death. It completes the work of baptism, leading us back to the welcoming embrace of our heavenly Father eagerly watching the road for our return, drawing us to Himself in the exaltation of his Son.<sup>5</sup> The road back may be long and difficult but the goal is the freedom of our Father's house and the liberty of the children of God. Penance eliminates gradually the selfishness which makes us blind to ourselves and to others. It

<sup>1</sup> Isai 6,5.      <sup>2</sup> St. Leo: Sermon 46.      <sup>3</sup> Mt 6,16.

<sup>4</sup> Ps 122,cf. Introit Mon. 1st Wk.      <sup>5</sup> Cf. Jn 12,32; 13,1; 17,1-10.

thus enables us to share more in the loving vision of God which embraces all the troubles and needs of mankind.

The Church's instruction on penance given during the first days of Lent is introduced by the account of the temptations of Christ in the desert and ends with His Transfiguration on Mount Thabor. In Christ tempted we see that the Christian life is of necessity a time of trial and testing. More important still we see in the victory of Christ over Satan our own victory over our own temptations: 'He fought them so that we too may be able to fight afterwards: He conquered them so that we too may be able to conquer in the same way'.<sup>1</sup> The point is not merely that Christ was tempted but that He won. His rejection of Satan is the guarantee of the efficacy of our renunciation of Satan in the renewal of baptismal vows.

The Transfiguration reveals the glory of the same Christ Who was tempted, but it also heralds an even greater temptation – that of Gethsemani. It is not coincidence that the prophecy of the passion follows directly on the account of the Transfiguration. Nor was it chance that the three who were privileged to see His glory were the same Peter, James and John who saw His agony. It is essential to glimpse the glory of God before engaging upon the way of the cross and to realise that the same glory is present, though hidden, at Calvary. The Church encourages us in the true sense of the word, she puts heart into us for the fight. The prospect of Christ's glory does not withdraw us from Christian warfare but leads us straight to the combat.

But Christ did penance before triumphing over Satan. Consequently, with Him we do penance during Lent because we know that our Christian life is going to be a struggle. Penance prepares us for 'the battles of our temptations'.<sup>2</sup> which are inevitable since, by our baptism, we are pledged to mortal combat with forces of evil. Temptation, coming to grips with the enemy, must be expected – were it only because the enemy is continually 'seeking whom he may devour'.<sup>3</sup> In the encounter the outcome is either victory or defeat. If we conquer it is because we have done penance. If we are defeated we shall need the sacrament of penance, that merciful loving pardon which sets our feet on the road of penance. We conquer in the same degree as we have died with Christ. It is the little death of penance which frees us to walk in the ways of God. Living according to the charity of Christ is not a penitential practice.

<sup>1</sup> St. Leo, Sermon 39.

<sup>2</sup> St. Leo, Sermon 39.

<sup>3</sup> 1 Pet 5, 8.

Virtue is the living force liberated by the death which is penance. The perfection of virtue is seen in the ease and spontaneity with which it is practised, for then it mirrors the infinite effortless power of God which nothing can withstand. The fact that we have difficulty in being kind, patient and forgiving, that we find it hard to be unselfish and chaste, shows that we need to do penance. For penance aims directly at reducing that inner complicity which sin finds in us. Because our nature has lost its pristine integrity we are 'drawn away by the lure of our own passions'<sup>1</sup>. This connivance of our nature with sin constitutes the real danger of temptation, for it is an unhealthy liking for evil. Until this is eliminated sin will always be present in our lives and as long as it remains we bear within us the possibility of eternal damnation. It is against this deep-rooted bias of a nature warped by original sin that penance must be directed. For before it ever becomes an action sin is a thing of the heart, and it is 'what comes from the heart that makes a man unclean.'<sup>2</sup>

It is then to be expected that the Church calls us to do penance with the words – 'Rend your hearts and not your garments';<sup>3</sup> and turns our attention first of all to the fact that penance is an interior renewal, a change of heart without which the external gesture has no meaning. Turning towards God would be easy were it simply a movement of the body, but it is also a movement of the heart and the will, 'the unjust man must forsake his thoughts',<sup>4</sup> if he is to forsake his unjust practices. Fasting, disciplines, depriving oneself of comforts and necessities may have all the exterior appearance of penance. That appearance however is an illusion unless it signifies an interior change. Man is neither just a soul nor just a body. Body and soul together form that unity which he is. He either goes to God as a unity or not at all. 'It is of little use if the body is weakened whilst the soul's strength is not increased'.<sup>5</sup> The whole object of penance is to make room in our hearts for the love of God, to oust our guilty affection for sin and replace it with divine charity. The external penance is meant to signify to us this interior desire – the hunger of the body is a sign that we wish to hunger for the love of God. To neglect this interior change of heart makes a mockery of penance or at best makes it a mere futile process of 'toughening ourselves up', a sort of endurance contest. Success in performing

<sup>1</sup> Jas 1,14.    <sup>2</sup> Mt 15,18.    <sup>3</sup> Joel 2,13.    <sup>4</sup> 1 Isai 55,7.

<sup>5</sup> St. Leo, Sermon 39.

external penance will inflate our egoism instead of eliminating it, just as failure will lead to discouragement. To make of penance a purely external affair can only ultimately lead to frustration, irritation or self-complacency. But it would be an illusion to imagine that the external gesture does not matter. It should be no more arbitrary than the interior penance. It should express the interior attitude which we seek and harmonise with it.

Since God, the Creator of man can alone renew his heart; since it is His power which can change a heart of stone to a heart of flesh; before ever we do penance we are brought up against the futility of the external gesture that is not inspired by God. External penances do not cause grace. They are not a means of bargaining with God. Nor is there necessarily any correspondence between the amount of external penance we do and our increase in the love of God. Unless external penance is what God wants it to be, unless it is performed in co-operation with Him, it will indeed be a death, but it will never be followed by a resurrection. The value of penance is not measured by the pain, difficulty or discomfort it inflicts, but solely by its efficacy in disposing us to love God and our neighbour with our whole heart and soul and mind and strength.

The prayers of the Masses in the first Week of Lent teach us to regard our external penances with great reserve and caution. We do not parade them before God demanding a *quid pro quo*, but we offer them with a prayer that they 'may please God and so be a helpful remedy to us'.<sup>1</sup> In order that our penances may be profitable we ask God 'to educate our hearts with his heavenly teachings'.<sup>2</sup> He alone knows what is in the depths of our souls and it is only in so far as He allows us to share in His clear vision that we shall see 'what is to be done and be capable of doing what is right'.<sup>3</sup> Only God's merciful attention to His wayward children can create in their hearts the desire signified by bodily penance. The whole tone of these prayers reveals that the Church regards exterior penance as an appeal, a cry for help, a dumb gesture of the body for which we seek God's approval. Only if He carries on in us this work of penance will our external gestures become significant and profitable.

But we must not imagine that external penance is our part of the work and interior penance is God's. That sort of Pelagianism cannot disappear too quickly. Penance is one work, and it must be inspired,

<sup>1</sup> Ash Wed. Postcommunion.      <sup>2</sup> Mon. 1st Wk. in Lent: Collect.

<sup>3</sup> Wed. 1st Wk. in Lent: Oratio Super Populum.

carried through and perfected by God. In this one work we are called to co-operate. Our efforts will avail only in so far as they coincide with the unceasing workings of God's grace within us. If the Church advocated and imposed fasting for so long it was because it seemed to have the divine sanction in the Bible. The fast of Christ in the desert revealed the sense and value of the fastings of Moses and Elias. But now that the Church no longer insists on fasting what are we to do?

The broad lines of an answer to that question are found in the simple formula – prayer, fasting, almsdeeds. Instead of 'fasting' we can substitute 'external penance in general', but let us remember that this triad is not made up of three separate actions. Prayer, penance, almsdeeds, are but three aspects of one reality, three moments in the single movement of turning back to God. Penance must be based upon a prayer for light and strength, upon a prayerful looking into our lives. Self-examination is a necessary preliminary; for unless we in some way feel that our sins are a burden, that our work for God is hampered by them, penance will be halfhearted. We must be convinced that we need penance.

The simple ceremony of the imposition of Ashes brings this point home. As is well-known, it belonged to the old rite of excommunication. The words – 'Remember man that thou art dust . . .',<sup>1</sup> take us back to that first dreadful excommunication of man by His Creator. Sin excludes us from fellowship with God and therefore from fellowship with His household and family – the Church. Sin weakens and, when it is serious, severs the bonds of love which bind us to the body of Christ, and prohibits us from partaking of the sacrament of love. It is an offence against Christ in His members, and we are responsible for our actions before that community of charity which we have betrayed. Sin is never a purely private affair between the creature and the Creator. The fact that the sinner is a member of a Church which is the family of God means that he sins against his brothers and his heavenly Father. His deficiencies affect not merely himself but others. If sin separates and ostracises us from that community of charity which is Christ's Church, penance must lead us to a more intense participation in that life. Charity is above all a way of behaving towards others, it is revealed in action not in words. Penance should then enable us to act in a more Christian way towards our fellow men and especially 'towards

<sup>1</sup> Gen 3,19.



those of the household of faith'.<sup>1</sup> The most ancient tradition sees fasting in this light. It was a means of having money or food to give to the poor. Personal penance was thus translated into immediate and effective service of God's poor. 'Without almsgiving, indeed, fasting is not so much a purification of the soul as a mere affliction of the body; there is more of avarice than of self-restraint in one who so fasts from food that he also fasts from works of loving-kindness.'<sup>2</sup> Even though we do not today fast from food it is possible to fast from other things. The needs of our fellow-men will guide us in our choice of penance. Visiting the sick or the lonely may mean giving up some of the time devoted to the cinema. The only way in which we can make a contribution in money to some sort of Christian charity may be by giving up tobacco or drink. In all this we are not merely depriving ourselves aimlessly of something we like, but we are replacing a selfish interest by one inspired by the universal charity of Christ. Our penance should help us to have a greater awareness of the needs of the world, an ability to recognise Christ in the poor, the sick, the lonely, the ignorant.

It is necessary to emphasise this social aspect of penance since the Church calls us as a body to do penance during Lent, but it would be an error to exclude the personal value of penance. Action for Christ will be effective only in the measure in which it finds its source in an intense personal love for Him. Furthermore, genuine action for Christ inevitably increases our awareness of the need for that personal contact with Christ which comes through prayer. We all agree that modern life is a hectic rush. Our days may of necessity be crowded and busy, but is it necessary that Christ should be on the fringe of the milling throng of events and activities instead of at their centre? The religion of Christ is not a luxury which only the leisured classes can afford. It is not an additional activity but a driving force which permeates and quickens every aspect of human life. There is not one of the multitude of activities which make up a day which does not either take us nearer to Christ or separate us from him. Christ has given an eternal value to each temporal moment and his Incarnation obliges us to take our human, temporal situation seriously. A Christian life is necessarily full, but its fullness is purposeful, working always towards a greater integration of man with God, with himself and with his fellow-men.

Ordering our activities in a Christian way necessarily entails

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<sup>1</sup> Gal 6,10.      <sup>2</sup> St. Leo, Sermon 15.

penance. Making time for prayer may entail the discipline of getting up earlier and consequently of going to bed earlier. It can be a salutary penance to ensure that we get the right amount of sleep even if it means abandoning television or an interesting book. Irritability and moodiness often follow a late night. Indeed the whole field of recreations and amusements may need serious Christian consideration. Wasting time does not mean doing nothing but rather the engaging of oneself upon an activity which has no relationship to daily life. Recreations can so often be merely an escape from the business of living. We plunge into them as into a dream world where we can forget the passage of time. They become distractions, vain attempts to abstract ourselves from the history which is a part of human nature. A vacation does not re-create us in the sense of enabling us to take up our work in the world with renewed energy and purpose. Rather it makes the return to work inordinately difficult, and we cling to its memory as a refuge from reality during the rest of the year. It can be a true penance to choose recreations wisely, using them only in so far as they help us to be relaxed and purposeful, conscious of our vocation as children of God working with Christ for the salvation of the world.

We may not be free to organise our daily schedule, but we are free to choose the attitudes we adopt to the daily round of events. Fretting never yet made a slow train go faster or produced sunshine on a rainy day. But there is a certain self-satisfaction in that sort of irritation – an impotent revenge like cursing the stone on which we have stubbed a toe. Boredom is often not a product of monotony but an attempt to escape from the realisation that time is passing. The life at Nazareth was probably humdrum but its uneventfulness did not bore the Saviour of the World, since He freely chose to submit Himself to the exigencies of human nature. In Him that freedom becomes ours. The Christian freely chooses with Christ to take up the cross of daily routine joyfully and purposefully, refusing to take refuge in daydreams, anxieties or regrets. That is the penance which can give a zest for life and sharpen our palate to appreciate the subtle but real values which Christ gives to the most ordinary of lives.

Penance is a normal part of the Christian life because it is normal that we should make up what is lacking of the spirit of Christ in our lives. Sin is an alien presence in the life of a Christian. The charity of Christ should in all justice manifest itself in the lives of those who belong to Him by their baptism. Hence we must make satis-

faction for our sins, we must replace the evil in our lives by good. That is nothing more than justice. Sorrow for sin is an illusion unless it is accompanied by an effective activity which seeks to restore the balance lost by sin. Sacramental pardon indeed effaces the guilt of our sins but it is granted only to those who are ready to do penance. Today the penance imposed by the priest in the sacrament very often consists only of a few prayers. But it would be an error to think of that penance as an equivalent to or a gauge of the seriousness or lightness of our sins. The work of satisfaction, of restoring the love that should be in our lives, does not end when we have *said* our penance. Penance has to be *done* as well as *said*. The prayers imposed by the priest are effective only through their relation to the merciful pardon of God which re-admits the sinner to the communion of the Church. The sacramental penance is the effective sign and pledge of our re-engagement on that way of salvation which can only be a following of Christ crucified. Accomplishing our penance after confession means shouldering the cross once again with the strength which only God can give. In union with the whole Church militant we enter the struggle against the powers of evil and strive to make manifest in our lives the victory of Christ by the splendour of our charity.