

CORPORAL PENANCE

Its Meaning Today

Josep M. Rambla

Presuppositions

WHEN DISCUSSING PENITENTIAL PRACTICES in today's world, we need, first of all, to clear away a number of common misunderstandings, which are either a legacy of unfortunate experiences in the past or, more often, part of the current way of thinking.

1. First, we must reject the idea of God as some sort of Moloch, an idol that demands and delights in our suffering. To imagine that penitential suffering, as such, is pleasing to God is a gross misinterpretation of a God who is Love. The merciful Father revealed in the New Testament is surely a God who has compassion for human suffering, sending his Son to free us from our pain. Unfortunately, however, a deformed image of God still lurks in the Christian unconscious.
2. Secondly, we should not regard penance as meritorious in itself, a source of spiritual gain, as if, through our own painful efforts, we could claim divine grace and good will. When we think like that we fall into a crude Pelagianism.
3. Thirdly, penance should never take the form of acts which are contrary to what it is to be human, since God created human nature just as much as God created grace. Both in the New Testament and in Ignatius, we find that it is the devil who is the real 'enemy of human nature'. Consequently, any form of mortification likely to harm a person, either physically or psychologically, cannot be in harmony with the plans of a God who has chosen to reveal Godself by becoming man, by 'humanising' Godself. However, as we shall see, the price we

must pay for making life more human is high in terms of asceticism.

4. A final point: we must never forget that we already participate in Christ's resurrection; we have been 'raised with Christ' and have already entered his new life (Colossians 3:1). In other words, Christianity is Life and an affirmation of life: 'in him every one of God's promises is a "Yes"' (2 Corinthians 1:19–20). It follows that any penitential practice—especially of the corporal kind—must embody an attitude of eschatological hope rather than be a denial of the corporeal and material.

Initial Considerations Drawn from Ignatius

We should always remember that the spiritual teaching of Ignatius Loyola is just a link in the long tradition that descends from the Bible and earlier Christian literature. St Paul speaks of the efforts and privations required by following Christ, and compares them to those of the athlete who runs in the stadium; and prior to Ignatius, there were other spiritual counsellors developing and illuminating the true meaning of penance. In the writings of the Fathers and Mothers of the Desert,¹ an important school of Christian wisdom, penance appears as a search for purity of heart, as a preliminary disposition for prayer, and as an exercise in the lucid discernment that leads to fidelity to the will of God in following Christ.

Penance in the Spiritual Exercises

When Ignatius speaks of penance in the *Spiritual Exercises* (Exx 82–89), he makes a distinction between interior and exterior penance: interior penance being the feelings that go with conversion (grief and repentance), while exterior penance refers to the measures applied to the body (hours of sleep, limits on food, physical mortification using instruments). He makes it perfectly clear that such exterior penance should not cause any bodily harm, and he explains three motives for adopting it (Exx 87): reparation for past sins; self-control 'so that all the lower parts of the self may become more submissive to the higher';

¹ See the *Apophthegmata* ('Sayings of the Desert Fathers'), and the works of Evagrius Ponticus, Cassian, the *Philokalia*, etc.

and the search for a particular grace. These three motives may be classified under the following headings: rectification; development; openness to grace.

Rectification. Conversion is a reaction to sin and implies a ‘putting right’ in some way. When the wrong is inflicted on the self, a difficult struggle may be needed: as in the case of combating certain addictions; restoring order to a chaotic lifestyle; or simply updating one’s professional knowledge so as to function more competently and correctly. When the wrong involves another person, as victim of an action which has damaged the finances, health or even life of that person, then there is an obligation in justice to undo the evil by means of some form of painful restitution: such as making a financial recompense; attempting to restore a damaged reputation; or compensating for harm done to the person’s health.

Development. The human person forms an integrated whole. But, in reality, we disrupt this harmonious state. Our existence is often a clash of actions and forces that bring disharmony and division into our lives. At times, we react violently to something; at other times, raw instinct takes over when quiet reflection would lead us in an opposite direction; and, even more often, we allow irrational fears to take control. Ignatius tells us that one of the aims of penance is ‘to overcome self, so that one’s *sensual nature* [*sensualidad*] may be obedient to reason and all the lower part of the self may become more submissive to the higher’ (Exx 87). Penance can be one of those means of self-development that are indispensable if one is to live a balanced, mature life, rather than one which is at the mercy of uncontrolled impulses.

Openness to grace. Another reason that Ignatius gives for penance is ‘to seek and find some grace or gift that a person wishes for or desires’ (Exx 87) and, in this regard, it is related to petitionary prayer, which is not intended to sway God—God surely knows and wants all that is for our good—but to open ourselves to accepting God’s will. Similarly, penance can become a *prayer of the body*, by means of which we are, to some extent, able to get out of ourselves and stop seeing ourselves as life’s centre. Instead of making our own actions and projects our objective, we abandon ourselves to God. Any desire that can be expressed in prayer can also take the form of bodily penance, which involves an element of negation or self-denial but affirms the

primacy of God. Such penance, therefore, is an openness to the God who is pure gift, but to whom we cannot have access by our own efforts and abilities. So, by the body's penance, the body itself can become prayer.

Given that penance has no value of itself but forms part of the activity of the whole person, its practice must be integrated into the full process of the spiritual experiences of the Exercises. Therefore, the penance practised should be in accordance with the degree to which exercitants are finding what is being sought. If false fears of harm to health are leading an exercitant to give up penance, then it may be necessary to introduce changes. There may also be temptations to give up because of a bout of desolation; or, on the other hand, too much self-confidence may lead to excessive penance (Exx 89).

Ignatius insists that exercitants 'should not be given things that they cannot undertake without fatigue' (Exx 18). This advice indicates the humane character that penance should always have, even when austere. Although Ignatius is speaking here primarily of people who may be frail, the fundamental principle is clear. It is true that he allowed Pierre Favre and Francis Xavier, while they were making the Exercises, a degree of penance that emulated his own practice in Manresa, but he confessed later that 'Now he would not dare to approve more than one day's fasting for someone who was robust'.²



Ignatius doing penance

² *Remembering Iñigo: Glimpses of the Life of St Ignatius of Loyola: The Memorials of Luis Gonçalves da Câmara*, translated by Alexander Eaglestone and Joseph A. Munitiz (Leominster: Gracewing, 2004), n. 305.

Ignatian Reservations

Ignatius himself was one of the great penitents and, for a while, rivalled other ascetics. When he decided to do some penance that the saints had done, he did the same ‘and more besides’.³ While he was in Manresa, his harsh penance (fasts, self-floggings, deprivation of sleep and so on) caused serious harm to his health, and so increased his mental anguish that he even thought of committing suicide. Like the good learner he was, he later realised that, though love can lead to madness and what he called ‘holy aberrations’, excessive penitential practices in the long run encourage an inner spiritual inflexibility which leads to an over-regard for rules and to self-satisfaction, and drains the energy needed for apostolic availability and other spiritual activities which should have priority. So, there are cases when Ignatius firmly restricts penitential excess, and others when he directs penitents to different spiritual activities of greater value.



Ignatius is tempted to suicide while fasting

One classic example of Ignatius’ teaching about avoiding penitential excess is found in his letter to the students of the Society of Jesus in Coimbra. They had been practising excessive and theatrical penitential rites, while showing little enthusiasm for rigorous intellectual study and even less for the discipline required for serious community life. Ignatius takes care not to rein in the good intentions of these young Jesuits nor to condemn their ways of mortification:

³ *Autobiography*, n. 14.

I am well aware that the saints made use of these and other *holy aberrations* and made progress through them. Such practices are useful for overcoming oneself, and for growing in grace, especially at the beginning.⁴

However, he urges the students to direct their fervour to the hard work of study, to growth in virtue, and to giving witness by their lives to the service of God and the good of souls. He is really pointing out to them that such excess may conceal an evil temptation under the cloak of goodness, and he is exhorting them to keep clear of ‘ill-judged enthusiasm’.

Francisco Borja’s case was very different: he was already well advanced in the spiritual life when he wrote to ask Ignatius for guidance in his prayers and penances. Knowing that Borja was exercising great rigour in his fasting and penitential practices, Ignatius stresses the importance of taking care of one’s body.⁵ It is to the body’s Creator that one will have to give account, and the condition of the body has an effect on the workings of the spirit and on the service of others. Bodily health is necessary for the service of God, so any plans Borja might have for fasting and abstinence should be in accordance with this.

As for ‘inflicting pain on one’s body’, Ignatius writes, ‘I would recommend omitting anything that might draw blood, even a drop’. Instead, ‘you should seek more directly from the Lord of everyone His most holy gifts’, such as tears ‘over your own sins ... or over the salvific events of the life of Christ our Lord, [or] ... from thinking of the Divine Persons or from love of Them’. We may be sure that,

... what is best for each individual is that in which God Our Lord imparts Himself more fully, displaying His holiest of gifts and his spiritual graces. It is God who sees and knows what is better for a person and God, knowing everything, shows the person the way forward.

⁴ Ignatius to the students at Coimbra, 17 May 1547, in *St Ignatius of Loyola: Personal Writings*, edited by Philip Endean and Joseph A. Munitiz (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996), 179; MHSJ EI 1, 495–510.

⁵ See Ignatius to Francisco Borja, 20 September 1548, in *St Ignatius of Loyola: Personal Writings*, 204–207; MHSJ EI 2, 233–237.

The gifts that Ignatius mentions are:

... intensity of faith, of hope and of love; spiritual rejoicing and repose; tears; intense consolation; the raising up of the mind; impressions or illuminations from God; and all other spiritual relishings and intuitions⁶

While addressing himself to students, Ignatius warns against possible deceptions that can creep into the practice of penance; but when he is replying to questions raised by Francisco Borja, he points to the place of corporal penance in the overall scheme of the spiritual life, and clearly subordinates it to higher Christian values.

Conditions for a Christian Corporal Penance: Freedom, Solidarity, the Love of Life

Throughout the history of Christianity, corporal penance has been a constant minefield. A pathological spirituality has caused harm to many very good people, who became victims of customs and practices that had little to do with the gospel: the cult of perfection, for example, spiritual narcissism, masochism, rivalry, anguish, scruples and so on. It seems to me that, if we are to recover the practice of a corporal penance that is in line with the gospel, we must keep three factors in mind: freedom, solidarity and humaneness.

Freedom. When the outcome is greater self-control, then we know that the penance we are using is Christian, because we feel free to take on more responsibility and are more positive in judging both ourselves and our potentialities. We are released from complexes, fears, scruples and insecurities. The overall result of such corporal penance is greater psychological hygiene: we feel, as it were, 'on top of the world'.

Solidarity. Christian penance can never be just an exercise in personal growth, separate from the solidarity demanded by the Christian message. As can be seen in so many examples, both from the past and the present, there is real danger in withdrawing into a rigorous self-control directed exclusively towards developing greater personal perfection, out of a desire for spiritual or bodily self-improvement, or

⁶ Ignatius to Francisco Borja, 20 September 1548, *St Ignatius of Loyola: Personal Writings*, 206.

out of human concerns with little gospel character, or at a lower human level. When in the early days of Christianity, believers in Jerusalem and Corinth practised material privation, they did so in order to share with and to help those in need. This is true penance, which enables a person to become more sensitive to the needs of others. It provides an insight into the hardships, often of appalling severity, suffered by others as a consequence of the social and economic systems in which they are forced to live.

Humaneness. Given that Christianity affirms the value of life, then the motive for penance must always be the development of the human life that is already sharing in the life of the Risen Christ. Bodily penance can never be justified by negative ideas or a Platonic misconception that downgrades the corporeal, the material or the human; and we should be on our guard against any penitential practice that involves or reveals a lack of sympathy with what is truly human.

Looking at the Present Situation

Belief Based on the 'Body'

In the final analysis, corporal penance can only make sense when it is the expression, in some way, of the whole human being. It is generally acknowledged that in biblical anthropology (which is very close to contemporary understanding of what it is to be human) the body, the *soma*, is to be identified with the complete person, in so far as this has an exterior manifestation and can relate to what is not oneself. Corporal penance, then, must be the expression of an inner penance and a deep sense of faith, which should express itself in various bodily ways, which are linked inextricably to what is innermost to the person.

It is clear, then, that penance can never be an imposition, but must grow in a way that is *connatural* to the believer and must take those distinctive forms that are most personal to that individual. This does not, of course, mean that an outsider cannot suggest motives and methods in the practice of penance. Within a course of spiritual exercises, where a person is willing and confident to be led by another, there are occasions when someone may be guided into adopting certain penitential practices. Likewise, penitential practices

that give expression to the communitarian character of the faith come under this heading. In my opinion, they should always be introduced with sensitivity and care but, on certain occasions, they can serve the ecclesial community: for example, during liturgical cycles; when religious constitutions stipulate them; or on those special occasions when some collective expression of conversion or solidarity with oppressed or impoverished individuals or nations would be appropriate.

Rediscovering sobria ebrietas

We are called to lead a full life, where what is material and truly human has a role. So even though we may inveigh against consumerism, as many of us very frequently do, we should celebrate the fact that we are *able* to consume, and should acknowledge that *everyone* should be allowed to share in the good things of the earth. This, of course, depends on our being able to resist the manipulation of our desires by marketing and by the pressures imposed by the interests of neo-liberal society. In addition, we have the task of educating ourselves in the real enjoyment of life, by discovering its authentic and most personal joys—such as friendship, festivity, art, the contemplation of beauty—while also cultivating the more material pleasures of bodily well-being—good eating and drinking, leisure and sport and so on. The *sobria ebrietas* celebrated by ancient authors as an inebriation brought on by the Spirit is something which should permeate everything human, not just the interior life. The work of the Spirit who fills everything will be complete when we are made a ‘spiritual body’ (1 Corinthians 15:44). However, it is quite evident that there is a need for hard work, painful practice, and true penance in order to reach that human pinnacle, where those seemingly all-powerful urges, ever open to external manipulation, submit to being controlled.

Solidarity with, and Sensitivity to, the Other’s Pain

Any effort to establish solidarity and commitment to others leads to a whole gamut of human reactions that can be penitential in the best Christian sense. The human response to suffering is to try to abolish or alleviate the pain, or to fight against the causes that are responsible for it. But this demands a personal investment of time and energy, and a willingness to undergo privation and fatigue. It requires

discipline and self-abnegation to remain constant in such a struggle. In the Third Week of the *Spiritual Exercises*, the verb ‘to suffer’ is repeated at specific moments, and the exercitant is led to ask ‘what I myself ought to do and suffer for him’ (Exx 195–197). Identification with Christ, best shown in the way Christ himself identifies with human sufferers,⁷ inevitably leads to that bodily suffering which is a consequence of love.

The way we relate to the victims of pain or injustice must be infused with a great humanity. It is not simply a matter of giving help, but involves comprehension—being aware of what is happening to the other; accompaniment—standing beside the one suffering; and sharing something that is happening to that person. It is possible to have knowledge of the sufferings of others at the level of ‘information’, where we know *about*; but such knowledge can leave us detached and indifferent. Here is another kind of knowledge that goes deeper and changes us. It is the knowledge that we gain when we actually accompany and share in the sufferings of others.

Certain penitential practices can seem pointless (such as fasting, cutting back on holidays, or limiting our spending on clothes, eating out or travel) as having no practical outcome; but perhaps such sacrifices allow us to get a glimpse of the real deprivations of many members of our society. They may also motivate us to a greater commitment and to a more generous and effective support for their



Ignatius gives his clothing to the poor

⁷ See Matthew 25: 31–40.

struggle. Above all, they can awaken a sense of human solidarity that may have no demonstrable results, but which can have a powerful effect on the hearts of those who suffer.

Spiritual Sensitivity

To become attentive to the Word, we have to let the light shine through us. In the parable of the sower, Jesus refers to those who hear the word 'but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word' (Matthew 13:22); they are stupefied by their addictions and compulsions for such things as money, comfort and luxuries. Our spiritual sensitivity can be blunted if we are held in the grip of an obsessive search for what is easy and pleasant, by the urge to impose ourselves on others, or by an ambition that will sacrifice anything for success or recognition. At such times, prayer becomes more difficult; we are reluctant to be honest and to discern in depth, and the true self becomes enslaved; vanity takes over and we lose a sensitivity to, and taste for, the values of the gospel. We cease 'to put on' the mind of Christ, and so cannot appreciate nuances accessible to 'faculties [that] have been trained' (Hebrews 5:14). Action is not enough, nor is any old sort of love, but only if we 'love one another as I have loved you' (John 15:12). How strange that we listen gladly to the Hymn to Charity, the 'more excellent way' (1 Corinthians 12:31), yet fail perhaps to recognise that such love is not only quantitative but also qualitative in its generosity.

If we are willing to attend the 'school' of Jesus, the education we receive there includes a penance which sets us free from the slavery that hampers us in living the gospel, especially in the area of love. Living in love, as the gospel teaches, is an art and a skill that can only be acquired over time. As with music and art, we must practise until gradually it becomes second nature.

Deterioration

So far we have been considering penitential practices within the context of normal conditions. Such penances are part of a healthy human life inspired by the gospel. But life for many human beings is full of situations that are *inhuman*: all kinds of failure, absurd accidents, the loss of mental or physical faculties, painful and unavoidable personal conflicts, etc. The battle within ourselves to accept with serenity, and perhaps even with humour, the progressive limitations that life

brings, can be really penitential: to be able to look positively at the increasing and unavoidable deterioration and diminution brought on by time is part of the invitation to faith. The New Testament teaches that existence is an ongoing process;⁸ it is a drawing closer to the Life that is already active within us by our share in the Resurrection of the Lord.

'Only Those to Whom It Is Given'

A complete opening up of our being, allowing ourselves to be invaded and possessed by God, is our purest experience of God. Sometimes this experience, which lies at the heart of the Christian life, can find outer expression in various forms, which are, in a sense, sacramental. Some Christian men and women have embodied such experiences in ways that are personal and unique. These arise from mystical experiences in response to God, who chooses to communicate in a particular way. They attempt to express in the personal life the absolute primacy of a God who is Love. Sometimes they may be ordinary practices such as extended fasts; or a long period of isolation and desert life; or night vigils; or the self-infliction of some non-hazardous discomfort, such as sleeping on the floor; or the abstinence required by celibacy or the vow of chastity. Occasionally, however, such self-imposed penances can be more dramatic and only make sense when seen from the perspective of disinterested love.

All forms of penance are intelligible only if seen as the expression of what is 'given' (Matthew 19:11). They make visible what is the core of the experience: faith in a God who is Love and in a Love that is God. God loves us quite gratuitously and, because of this, God can both subdue us and delight us. 'My God and my All!', St Francis of Assisi used to say, while Teresa of Avila declared, 'God alone suffices!'

To Find God in All

God is always 'more' and in any relationship with God, I must strip away all self-regard so that I can be taken over entirely by Him, divesting myself 'of self-love, self-will and self-interest' (Exx 189). To find God in all things means getting rid of a counterfeit love and

⁸ See Romans 8:18–39; 1 Corinthians 15:20–28; 1 John 3:1–2.



Ignatius receives the gift of tears

allowing ourselves to be possessed by the love that ‘has been poured into our hearts’ (Romans 5:5). Then we can be free of a way of life that is focused on possessing and devouring. We gain the joy of being motivated by the love of God, which ‘descends from above’ (Exx 184, 338), and so are ‘able to love and serve his Divine Majesty in everything’ (Exx 233).

This exodus from our ‘self-love, self-will and self-interest’, which Ignatius teaches is the key to ‘making progress in things of the spirit’ (Exx 189), carries with it the practice of ‘mortification and abnegation of the will’, and obviously implies the denial of our own judgments. We should evaluate and direct our decisions in accordance with the values of the gospel, setting our minds not on human things but on God (Mark 8:33), and adapting our will to what God wants (Mark 14:36). The outcome of such transformation,

in which we allow the love of God to be active through and in us, is that we find *devoción* in everything that happens: we find God in all things.

It may seem that I have wandered away from the subject of corporal penances, but that is not so. Corporal penance, if it is really Christian, must express what is real and personal. The struggle to overcome our worldly inclinations, and adjust our own judgment and will to the plans and will of God, carries with it discomfort, privation and, at times, pain. Moreover, until we are prepared 'to seek in Our Lord one's greater abnegation and continual mortification in all things possible'⁹ we will find it difficult to reach that conformity to the will of God that is the essence of a real encounter with God.

Conclusion

In our exposition, we have stressed how penance lies at the heart of the Christian experience of God, nor does it disappear in the higher reaches of a Christian life. Any advanced stage of human endeavour requires the effort of continual self-improvement. However, it is worth remembering the words of St Benedict, that the beginnings of the spiritual life are laborious and painful, but that as one advances further along the path of Christian living, progress becomes more bearable, 'with the unspeakable sweetness of love'.¹⁰

So, at this point, it may be helpful to offer a more attractive image of penance, as being like the reverse of the beautiful tapestry that is a Christian life. Wherever there is beauty, there is also labour that gives birth to its splendour. In all Christian living, where we try to embody the incomparable beauty of the life of Jesus, the artistic efforts and the labour of all our being lie hidden. And penance is one of those necessary tasks, a tuning of the instrument which allows it to take part in the symphony of the gospel. As the poet said: 'It may be true that this life is a bad instrument, but to live is music'.¹¹ We have been raised in Christ, and our life is hidden with Christ in God.¹² Corporal

⁹ *Constitutions Examen*, 4.46 [103].

¹⁰ *Rule of St Benedict*, Prologue, lines 46 and 49.

¹¹ The words of Marius Torres (born in 1911): '*Potser la nostra vida sigui un mal instrument, / però és música viure.*'

¹² See Colossians 3:1-40.

penance, therefore, can have meaning only in the joyful light of the Good News.

Josep Maria Rambla SJ is a theologian and spiritual director. He is a member of the study centre Cristianisme i Justícia and a director of EIDES (Escola Ignasiana de Espiritualitat). He is a professor of spirituality at the Facultat de Teologia de Catalunya.

translated and adapted by Joseph A. Munitiz SJ and Oonagh Walker