

On the Spirit of Penance

2nd March 1873

My dear Daughters,

At we enter into the Lenten season it seems timely to speak about the spirit of penance.

No one can dispense herself from penance. The Gospel is clear: "If you do not do penance you will all perish." But does that mean to say that no one can be dispensed from fasting and abstinence? Surely not, for now few people are capable of strict fasting and abstinence. From this we can see that this form of penance, proposed by the Church, is not the one thing necessary for fulfilling the precept. What is necessary is the spirit of penance; and even in Religion, we need to renew ourselves in this.

What then is this spirit of penance? Father Faber defines it as "a habitual sorrow for the sins that one has committed." There is no solid foundation in a soul without this habitual sorrow, this habitual regret for our faults. I do not mean to say that this sorrow should always be present in your thoughts, nor that your sins should constantly be before your eyes. That is impossible. But you must have the sense of contrition, of sorrow, each time that you think of the sins you have committed.

If you have no mortal sins to reproach yourself of, it is because you have been preserved by a special grace; but the venial sins into which you have fallen after so many graces received, so many helps, already manifest a real lack of gratitude towards God. And if none of us here has committed mortal sins, there is not one who does not blush within herself when she thinks of the venial sins she has committed with total consent of her will - acts of infidelity, extreme self-seeking - in giving in to her dominant fault.

The spirit of penance, is therefore contrition, a regret for our sins. It is also humility of heart that makes us choose the last place and put everyone else before ourselves, recognising that we deserve to be treated as public penitents because of our sins, our bad habits, our pride, our lack of devotion, and the little consideration that we give to the rights of God. Therefore we embrace penance, and we maintain a great spirit of humility in relation to others. All this is nothing else but the spirit of penance; but this spirit engenders the virtue of penance, in leading us to make acts of penance.

When we cannot accomplish the penances imposed by the Church, they must be replaced by something else; and in Religion it is very easy to do penance. We have first of all the strict accomplishment of the Rule, then all the acts of surrender of an obedience which is submissive, prompt and humble, the acceptance of all the sacrifices, humiliations, and pains that one experiences in obedience. These are the exterior acts of mortification and penance.

To this we can add our work, submitting ourselves to the tasks assigned to us; being faithful and attentive, making every effort to do what you must do, and to do it well. There, I repeat, are the exterior acts of penance which are sufficient to absorb our strength. In all teaching Orders, the tasks and work, are considered sufficient to wear out all the strength; and even in the other Orders, the Trappists, for example, it is said that the job of the chief cantor or chief sacristan is enough to make one die in it or because of it.

Our jobs do not tax only our strength; they subject the will, for we have to take care to do each thing as it is fixed in the schedule. If one's lesson is at two o'clock, one must be exact in arriving at two o'clock, and not prolong it beyond the period fixed.

For our Co-adjutrix Sisters, it is the same thing: the fatigue of their work, the trouble they take to do it well, takes the place of other austerities. Thus the cook, although she does not fast, suffers from the heat of the fire, stands the whole day and has the solicitude of serving everyone. This is the way it goes for all the Sisters; each one has the difficulties, the mortifications of her employment. What matters is to be as devoted as possible to do our work perfectly, with a supernatural intention of pleasing God. And believe me, Sisters, high level jobs also have their sufferings; to have responsibility for souls requires so much solicitude in order to accomplish the will of God in everything.

There are many other acts of mortification that everyone can do which do not harm our health. Note well, however, that to root out something forbidden is not mortification. For example when you feel like saying an uncharitable word and you do not say it: that is justice. You are only doing what you should do. You are obeying the precept which forbids speaking against your neighbour. But if you repress a word of curiosity, a spiritual sally that will bring you honour, one of those thousands of words that we so love to say to show our wittiness and intelligence, then you mortify yourself;

Just the same you must not push this too far, Sisters, and suppress all enthusiasm, all variety in community life, all laughter at recreations. We should make an effort, on the contrary to bring to recreation a joyous spirit, a spirit of charity, and act in such a way that no-one is left with hurt feelings.

Silence also is an act of mortification. I was delighted when I found in one of the works of Father Faber that silence perfectly observed is a great virtue and an excellent means to do penance. And all of us can observe it.

And another thing, is to have a perfectly religious deportment, to deny ourselves those thousand little "*laisser aller*" which give more comfort to the body, but which are not the behaviour of a perfect religious... Mortify curiosity, not to allow ourselves to look at something we could watch, to read something that is not forbidden. For food, to take what

is set before you; eat what is not to your liking, and even eat a little bit more when you naturally would not want to... Finally, those thousand little things which mortify our eyes, those spurts of self-love, our curiosity, our hearing, our taste, in a word our five senses. These are the most useful mortifications and the most agreeable in the eyes of God, because they serve to introduce us to the practice of the virtues.

Thus, if in our employments we act supernaturally we will not only avoid faults and imperfections, on the contrary we will acquire the virtues contrary to our defects. We will become mortified, patient, modest, humble, meek and thus the other virtues will follow which depend on mortification. Virtue is, in a certain sense, the cutting out of something we could have done without sinning. It consists also in self-control, not letting ourselves go when irritated, vexed, or in pain, in order to offer ourselves continually to God.

In practising mortification this way, my dear Daughters, those who in the line of fasting, can do very little, can bring themselves closer to the spirit of penance of the great Religious Orders. It is with this thought in mind that many persons who have had in their heart and soul the desire to embrace perfection in the austere Orders, have been obliged to renounce it and have come to the Orders which, with the same interior perfection, admit some mitigations. We have more than one of these persons among us - which explains the mitigations that we are

obliged to permit, on the one hand because of poor health, and on the other, because of our employments, our work, of all that we do in the house and which suffices to use up all our strength.

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