



*January 25, 1891*

## On Penance

*To conquer themselves and to unite themselves to Jesus Christ Crucified, whose ever-renewed immolation on our altars they adore, penance is necessary for them.*

My dear Sisters,

We are already beginning to see the signs of penance in the Church services; we no longer pronounce the Alleluias, in a spirit of penance. How should we carry this inwardly? We are not yet in the season of Lent, and yet the Church is already turning our thoughts toward penance. What can we do? We cannot embrace outward austerities; our lives are already burdened enough by the demands of teaching and other occupations, and *this is enough to exhaust our strength*, as the Rule says.

If we could take to heart everything contained in the Constitutions in the Chapter on Mortification, we would be in an admirable state of mind, we would practice a very high degree of perfection. Have you noticed that it says in this Chapter: *Their life does not belong to them; it should matter little to them whether it is long or short, provided it is used for God's purpose.* This is extremely powerful; I don't believe anything more can be said regarding the state of mind we should be in. However, I want to say a word to you about penance, about the spirit of interior penance.

The first thing is the confusion of past sins: Saint Teresa speaks of them at length, and in everything she says, one senses that it is God who speaks and inspires her. It is with a contemptuous and humble heart that one must strive to maintain throughout the course of life; ultimately, when one looks at oneself, one has many reasons to be contrite and humble<sup>1</sup>.

A person who believes they possess every kind of virtue and merit could only be deluded. There is no disposition that God so abhors; He detests and rejects the prayer of the Pharisee, while the tax collector returns justified to his home<sup>2</sup>. Perhaps we have not committed many sins, but we must regret all those, already so numerous, that we have done.

If there is one virtue that facilitates Religious Life, it is the spirit of penance. If difficult things happen, we accept them, and that's all there is to it. Sometimes it's a contradiction, a humiliation,

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<sup>1</sup> Ps 50, 19.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Lk. 18:9-14

a disagreeable remark; it doesn't take much for this to affect us, we are not brave, and if our pride is offended, we immediately feel it to the very core of our being. On the contrary, if we have a contrite heart, it passes quickly; we then accept the wills that thwart us, the things that humble us or that can cause suffering, in a spirit of penance.

Certainly, that is not the dominant motive; in my opinion, the dominant motive for accepting what is costly is perfect surrender into the hands of God, and every Religious woman must strive to be ready for all the events that arise in life. We will all, or almost all, die, as a holy man once said! We will suffer illnesses. Who knows by what means God intends to take us from this life, through what suffering, through what humiliations we will have to pass, for illness is always a humiliating state.

Great humiliations may accompany it. No one knows what she will have to go through.

See how Our Lord took upon Himself all that was hardest; He accepted the torment of the Cross. What was most painful, Our Lord chose, willed, and accepted; the cup He was to drink, He knew in His infinite wisdom, and He accepted it. As for us, we do not know what awaits us. If we are true Religious, we must place ourselves in God's hands through trust, adoration of His rights, and love, which is always ready, always willing to do all that God wills. The spirit of penance helps greatly, but the primary reason is love, surrender, and adoration of God's rights. One does not need to be the fourth person of the Holy Trinity to have an opinion on what God wants from us; it was Saint Chantal who said this to one of her Sisters.

The first motive, therefore, is the love of God and the trust we must have in His guidance, for if God allows us trials, He will know how to sustain us through them. Who would have expected Sister Charlotte-Marie<sup>3</sup> to have so much patience? While she was certainly struck hard on one hand, on the other she was extremely supported, and patience never failed her in the face of excessively cruel trials. Everything was there: suffering, humiliation, unpleasant odors from the iodine treatment—she accepted it all, ready for anything, always surrendering. From beginning to end, her body was the object of continuous suffering and humiliation, but God sustained her, and she submitted to everything.

If it is said that no one can practice continence without God granting it, it can also be said that no one can be patient without it. We must recognize God's gift in patience, which engenders infinite merits within us and prepares a magnificent crown for all that we have suffered.

This is why we must surrender ourselves into God's hands, but the spirit of penance can always help us with this as well. Habitually saying to ourselves in the face of what happens, "I deserved it," is a great strength; "this humiliation, this suffering, I deserved it." Whenever something happens, one way or another, after the act of love and surrender, what helps most is the act of penance and humility that makes us say that this is truly our due, that we are still being treated by God with great mercy, which we deserve even more. This is a great strength, and I wish it for you. Therefore, as you study the spirit of penance, I ask you to apply it to things that are very practical for you: embrace them, accept them, and do penance for them. Our Lord will reward you first in the joys of Easter. Your Easter will be more joyous if you have done more for God. And then you will also be rewarded in the love you will feel deep in your soul for our Lord, in the union you will have with him through this disposition to always submit to all His wills.

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<sup>3</sup> Sister Charlotte-Marie died on December 25, 1890.

