



November 5, 1876

Spirit of penance

Saint Marie Eugenie of Jesus

My dear Daughters,

Advent is near and it suggests a thought, an austere thought, but a necessary one, the thought of penance.

Penance is an essential foundation for the Christian life and such more so for the religious, life.

We are told that St. Augustine, on his death-bed shed abundant tears, while reciting the seven penitential psalms, and declared that no Christian should face death without penance. What did he mean by penance? At that moment he was not thinking of bodily austerities. He had suffered such and with great patience and fortitude. No, he meant that no one should meet death without contrition, the interior virtue of penance. Why was he so moved as to weep? You might say that he had such to repent of. True, but it is theologically certain that Baptism washes all sins, and he had been baptized when he gave up his sinful life and gave himself to God. Theology also teaches that perfect love takes away sin, and St. Augustine was a great lover of God.

We must apply his words to ourselves: "No Christian ought to face death without penance".

Penance is a necessary foundation for perfection and love. Jeanne de Chantal declared that she would have no opinion of anyone's virtue if it was not founded on hatred for sin. And St. Therese says: "Every soul, however advanced needs to come back to self-knowledge".

Perhaps you have never committed a grievous sin. But what about the results of original sin that are in all of us? Who could boast of having no trace of secret pride, or of touchiness, and no attachment to self-will? You tell God every-day that you love Him above all things and much more than yourself. Even if we live up to that we are bound as nuns to something more. We have to acquire the virtues contrary to the capital vices. Humility that drives out the last vestiges of pride - and a nun must acquire it to follow Our Lord and share his dispositions towards suffering, contempt, injustice and towards life and death.

There is Poverty too that drives out all stinginess, all attachments, and that is a necessary mark of the religious life.

And Purity. It does not only guards a nun from all that might stain her soul, but it is itself guarded and, as it were, wrapped round by her contempt for all that is worldly.

For a religious. Envy is inadmissible. We ought to be glad when we outdone by others in God's service. We must serve God as well as we can, and yet like others to do even better so that God will get more glory. Another essential mark of a nun is the habit of mortification, the mortification that detaches her from the pleasures of sense so that she gives them up, does not want them, does not accept them.

As a fruit of mortification and humility a nun must be ready to practice patience and gentleness whenever occasion requires it. And finally she is expected to be hardworking, ardent in God's service and eager for God's glory and the good of souls.

Have we all these virtues? Who has! We would do better to see what faults we still have that are contrary to them and make of that the matter of our penance. Listen again to St. Augustine: "The essential thing is to bewail, not the sins of the past, but the inclination to sin that remain in us".

Supposing that one of you had in the past committed a grievous sin of which she had entirely repented and which was now as far from her as the North Pole is from the South Pole, no doubt she should still grieve for having offended God, but her danger does not lie in that direction. It lies in any pride, impatience, softness that she still has and that may lead her to offend God by venial sin, which in its turn to tepidity leads and that is the road to enmity with God.

All this makes me want to impress upon you the importance of intensifying your spirit of penance. It rouses us to call on God and draws down on us His mercy. We have a great need of this spirit of penance both to take away our tendency to sin and to enable us to practise the virtues a nun ought to practise and that we still lack.

That opens us a wide field for our efforts. I advise you to read the chapter in the fourth book of the Imitation - Chapter VII - which says that before Holy Communion, we should lament and grieve in secret over our daily offenses, over the miseries of our passions and the faults we most often commit. Notice that there is no question of serious sins but of being drowsy over holy things and wide awake for news of the world; of talking so thoughtlessly, of being so distracted at prayer, and so on. That shows what saints and holy people who live in the light of God think of preparation for Holy Communion and of how we should grieve for our most habitual faults.

St. Augustine says that what can conquer habits of sin is vehemence of repentance. It is not easy to have deep sorrow for our habitual faults. But we can stir this sorrow up in our hearts by looking at God, not the God of terror but the God of kindness and compassion who has lavished so much grace and mercy on us. Look at the great love he shows us, look at the happiness he has in store for us. Contemplate Our Lord suffering for us. He gives Himself to us so often and he longs so ardently for our love. In the light of such goodness and love look at our constant failures, our attachment to venial sin, and the evil inclinations that sometimes make us unfaithful to God.