



LENTEN PASTORAL LETTER

OF THE

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JOHN—by the Grace of God and the appointment of the Holy See, BISHOP OF LONDON.

To the Clergy, Religious Communities and Faithful of our Diocese Greeting and Benediction in the Lord.

DEARLY BELOVED BRETHREN,

The penitential season of Lent, which is now at hand, is a time during which the Holy Church calls on her children in a special manner to repent them of their sins, to do penance, and to mortify the flesh, with its vices and concupiscences. In the burning words of the prophet, she says to them, "Seek ye the Lord while He may be found: call upon him while He is near. Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unjust his thoughts, and let him return to the Lord, and He will have mercy on him, and to our God, for He is bountiful to forgive." (Isaiah lv. c.) Lent is a time specially consecrated to repentance, to mortification of the passions, to fasting and abstinence, and other penitential works.

It should also be characterized by great fervour in prayer and by earnest meditation on the life, the sufferings and death of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Our Lenten penitential works are based on the imitation of the Son of God, are in strict accord with His divine teachings, and borrow their supernatural value and expiatory power from the merits of His mortifications, sufferings and death. In fact, our Lent is but a feeble attempt to put into practice the lessons taught us by His works and words. The whole Christian scheme is based on the principles of self-denial, mortification and penance. Our Lord Himself has told us that if we wish to become His disciples, we must deny ourselves, take up our cross daily and follow Him (Math. xvii. 24.) And he declares as follows: "He that loveth his life shall lose it, and he that hateth his life in this world keepeth it unto life eternal." (John xii. c.) And hence we find him acting out this divine philosophy, for our example, in fasting forty days and forty nights in the wilderness, and in all the humiliations and sufferings of His life on earth.

St. Paul tells us that if we live according to the flesh we shall die, but if by the spirit we mortify the deeds of the flesh we shall live (Romans viii. 13), and that they that are of Christ have crucified their flesh, with its vices and concupiscences (Gal. v. 24). The reason of this is that we have fallen from our first estate, that our passions and inclinations tend to evil and must be repressed, that self-love is a fountain of moral corruption, and must be mortified, that we are sinners, and must therefore repent and do penance, and try to satisfy, in some measure, the justice of God, through those means and agencies which He himself has appointed.

With sin have come into the world the need and the purpose of penance; and the purport of this letter is to suggest some thoughts on this divine remedy of sin, penance—especially as regards its institution and efficacy as a sacrament of the Christian dispensation.

Sin is the greatest evil, is, in fact, the only essential evil in the world. It is the great enemy of God and of man; it is a mystery of iniquity that causes God to veil his face from his children, and overshadows the world with countless sorrows and miseries. Sin is infinitely opposed to God and to his inalienable and sovereign rights in his own Creation. God is the supreme good, sin is the supreme evil, God is essential order, sin is disorder, God is love, sin is hate, God is plenitude of being, "I am who am," sin is absolute decline and negation; and hence there exists between God and sin an eternal enmity, an impassable gulf, a necessary contradiction, an infinite repugnance.

Sin is opposed to the happiness and the destinies of man. The true happiness and destiny of man here below consist in doing the holy will of God, as manifested to him in the divine commandments and in the teachings and precepts of the Church, and in thus seeking the kingdom of God and His justice, in order one day to reach His eternal home in the kingdom of heaven. Sin makes man a rebel to the holy will of God, and therefore destroys his true happiness, and robs him of his immortal destinies. "Who," asks the royal prophet, "can understand sin?" (Psalm 18-v.13.) In sin, there are two grievous evils, which God Himself describes in these words, "Be astonished, O ye heavens, at this—for my people have done two evils; they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and have digged to themselves cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water." (Jer. ii. c. 12v.) In mortal sin, therefore, there are two monstrous evils—the turning away from God, the supreme Good, and the fountain of all goodness, graces and mercies; and the embracing in His stead the evil of sin, led thereto by the glamour of some fancied good and happiness, justly compared to the broken cistern that can hold no water to slake the thirst of the soul, or to satisfy its wants.

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THE NECESSITY OF REPENTANCE.

Now repentance or penance is the only remedy and destroyer of sin. It is the sincere conversion of the heart from sin to God. It also must have these two qualities or conditions: 1st. The turning away from sin with loathing and detestation, and with sincere sorrow for having offended God; 2nd, and the returning to God with sentiments of gratitude and love, and with the firm purpose of faithfully obeying His holy law.

Penance, in the Christian dispensation, is both a virtue and a sacrament. As a virtue, it simply means sincere and heartfelt contrition, and as such was at all times absolutely necessary for obtaining the remission and forgiveness of sin, as we find from the teachings of Holy Scripture.

Thus holy David says to God, "If thou hadst desired sacrifice, I would indeed have given it; with burnt offerings thou wilt not be delighted: a sacrifice to God is an afflicted spirit; a contrite and humble heart, O God, thou wilt not despise," (Psalm 50-18vs.); wherein it is declared that even the highest act of worship, sacrifice, would not be pleasing to God, unless accompanied by sentiments of deep and heartfelt contrition and humiliation for having offended the Divine Majesty. Again, the word of God affirms: "When thou shalt seek the Lord thy God thou shalt find him; yet so, if thou seek Him with all thy heart and with all the affliction of thy soul." (Deuteronomy 4-29.) And again, "Now, when thou shalt be touched with the repentance of thy heart—and return to him—the Lord thy God will have mercy on thee." (Deut. xxxi. 1, 2, 3.) In Ezekiel (c. 18 v. 30-31) God Himself declares in the most emphatic manner that penance is the only plank by which the sinner may escape from the ruin and shipwreck of sin; "Be converted to me and do penance for all your iniquities, and iniquity shall not be your ruin. Cast away from you all your transgressions, and make to yourselves a new heart and a new spirit; why will you die, O house of Israel; for I desire not the death of him that dieth, saith the Lord God; return ye and live."

"Now, therefore," saith the Lord, "be converted to me with all your heart, in fasting, and in weeping and in mourning, and rend your hearts and not your garments." (Joel. 11c. 12 v.)

When St. John the Baptist came forth from the desert to prepare the way of the Lord, he preached the baptism of penance for the remission of sins, and in burning words, that like a cry of agony smote the hearts of his hearers, he exclaimed, "Ye offspring of vipers, who hath shown you to flee from the wrath to come; bring forth, therefore, fruits worthy of penance." (Luke iii. c. 7 v.) Our Lord Himself began his public ministry by exhorting to penance: "Do penance, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." (Matt. 4th. c. 17v.) And He emphatically declares that penance alone can save the sinner. "I say to you, unless you do penance you shall all perish." (Luke xiii. c. 5 v.) Hence, the Council of Trent affirms, "Penitence was, indeed, at all times, necessary, in order to attain to grace and justice for all men who had defiled themselves by any mortal sin, even for those who begged to be washed by the Sacrament of Baptism." (Sess. xiv. c. 1st.)

THE INSTITUTION OF THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE.

Our Blessed Lord came down from heaven to destroy the power of Satan, to overthrow the reign of sin, and to establish in its stead the kingdom of God's peace and charity. The object of his earthly mission, and the work of his divine life here amongst us, was to save mankind from sin and its dreadful consequences, and to rescue them from the horrors of an eternal death. He therefore took the virtue of penance, and raised it up to the dignity and the saving power and efficacy of a sacrament, and attached to it for all time the divine attribute—the God-power of forgiving sins. Henceforward, this sacrament of penance will be the channel through which in life-giving streams the precious blood will be poured abroad for the salvation of the penitent sinner; it will be a divine probatica, into whose healing waters the spiritually sick and blind, and lame, may be plunged for the healing of their souls, and for the recovery of their health and strength. It will send the voice of Christ into the graves, where too many souls, alas, lie, Lazarus-like, dead and stinking with putrefaction, calling them back to life and health, and happiness, and restoring them living members to the Holy Church of God.

Whenever our Blessed Lord intended to establish some great institution of mercy and love, He first promised it in order to prepare men's minds for it, to awaken in them a yearning expectancy, and to dispose men to appreciate the better boon to be conferred; and then after some time He fulfilled His promise by the creation of the institution. Thus, when He intended to institute the sacrament of the Blessed

Eucharist, He first promised it as we find it in the 6th chapter of the gospel according to St. John: "The bread which I will give, is my flesh, for the life of the world," and then He redeemed His promise by the institution of the sacrament, when He said at His last supper, "This is my body—this is my blood." (Math. xxvi.) So also, when He determined for the preservation of the Church's unity and life to establish the primacy of St. Peter and his successors, He first said to Peter: "Thou art Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it, and I will give to thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven" (Math. c. xvi-v 19); and after His Resurrection He actually conferred the primacy when He commissioned Peter to feed His lambs and to feed His sheep—that is, the whole flock of the divine sheepfold—all the members of the Holy Church. (John xxi.)

In accordance with this law of conduct, our Divine Redeemer first promised the institution of the sacrament of penance, when He said to His apostles, "Whosoever you shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven, and whatsoever you shall bind on earth, shall be bound in heaven." (Math. xviii. v. 18.) And when the minds and hearts of the apostles were in some measure prepared for the reception of this stupendous power, for the establishment of this wondrous institution of God's infinite pity and mercy for sinful man, He then instituted the sacrament when He said to them, "Receive ye the Holy Ghost, whose sins you shall forgive they are forgiven, and whose sins you shall retain they are retained." (John xx-23). The words used by our Saviour in the institution of this sacrament are worthy of our deepest attention, for they seem to have been specially employed to show the awfulness of the institution, to show that it was indeed a new creation on the earth, and the work in a special manner of divine omnipotence and infinite mercy. He began by assuring the apostles that He constituted them His vicars and representatives, and that He there and then conferred on them the same authority to teach and the same power to forgive sins with which He himself as man had been clothed by the Eternal Father: "As the Father hath sent me, I also send you." As if He would say, I as man hold from God the power to forgive sins, and that I have this power I have already proved by a miracle (Math. ix. c.), and thereby delegate that power to you forever—to the Church, and to its ministers for all times, do I give this divine prerogative, this God-power for the destroying of the reign of sin in human hearts and souls, and for the salvation of all penitent sinners.

"He then breathed upon them." When God made man, "He breathed into his face the breath of life, and man became a living soul." (Gen. 2. c. 9 v.) "He inspired into him the soul that worketh, and he breathed into him a living spirit." (Wisdom xv-11)—that is, the breath of God breathed into inanimate matter, created man, and made him a living rational person—gave him the soul that worketh, and the living quickening spirit—made man the master work of His creation, made him a little less than the angels, and crowned him with glory and honour. This is the first instance of which we are told in Scripture that God breathed upon man, and the result was the existence of rational man, made in the image and likeness of God, "Constituted in innocence and justice," that greatest and most perfect work of the first creation, on beholding which "all the morning stars shone out together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy." (Job. xxxviii 7 v.) The second instance is that of which we read in the xxxi. c. of Ezekiel, when the spirit of God breathed upon the dry bones that filled the plain, and they started into living men, and "stood up upon their feet an exceeding great army." We thus find it a settled law, that whenever the Scripture mentions that God "breathed," we may expect a singular exercise of His creative power. We have a right to expect a new creation of His infinite power, goodness, and love.

When, therefore, we read that our Lord "breathed" upon His apostles, we should be prepared for some creative act, for a special exercise of omnipotent mercy and love. And this is precisely what occurred. Our Blessed Saviour on this occasion breathed His divine life into the Church, and made it a living organism. It was a new creation, a new moral world, that was called into being, a spiritual kingdom established by the risen Christ, that shall never be destroyed, and that shall stand forever amid the revolutions and changes of time, doing Christ's work in the world. To this Church He communicated the Holy Ghost to be its abiding life; and that divine Spirit will never henceforward cease, through the Sacrament of Penance to work miracles for the salvation of souls. He will work miracles, such as that wrought by Christ at the tomb of Lazarus, and as those others wrought by our Lord during His life on earth; He will raise the spiritually dead to life; He will, in a spiritual sense, make the blind to see, the lame to walk, the deaf to hear, and He will preach the blessed evangel of immortal hope and infinite mercy, and compassion to poor sinners. As by the fall, man lost the supernatural life of the soul, and defaced the image of God stamped upon it, so in the order of restoration effected through Christ, the Holy Ghost, through the Sac-

rament of Penance, restores to man the supernatural life he had lost, and gives him back the image of God in all its pristine beauty and loveliness. And thus the new creation daily operated by the spirit of God, through this sacrament, is, if possible, more glorious than the original creation; it seems more worthy of God, since it is a brighter revelation of His infinite mercy, compassion and love, and because the re-creation and salvation of the soul is a greater exercise of omnipotence, a greater work than the creation of the material world, with all its wondrous harmonies and beauties.

This line of thought is in accord with what the great St. Cyril writes on this subject. "In the beginning," he says, "man was made by the word of God, and God breathed into him the breath of life, and enriched him by a participation of his spirit. But since by disobedience man fell, and lost his pristine comeliness, God again formed him and restored to him a new life through his Son, in order that he might learn that it is the same God, who in the beginning, created human nature and sealed it with the holy Spirit, and again in the beginning of the restoration of human nature communicates by breathing the Holy Ghost to his disciples to the end, that as we were created in the beginning, so also we might be renewed." The Sacrament of Penance is therefore one of the greatest of God's works, one of the greatest of His institutions of divine mercy and love, and a most powerful and efficacious means of salvation. It is indeed the true refuge of sinners, the sanctuary of asylum in the new law, which shields sinners from the consequences of their guilt, and hides them from the wrath of God and His terrible judgments. And if the Church in the excess of her joy, dares to sing on Holy Saturday "O felix culpa," "O happy fault which merited such and so great Redeemer," may we not venture, in the exuberance of our heartfelt gratitude to God, to say, "O happy sins which deserved the institution of so great, so wondrous a Sacrament in which as in an inexhaustible fountain, the precious blood of Jesus, which speaketh better than that of Abel, forever flows for the salvation of sinners, in which it washes the soul from the guilt of sin, and makes it whiter than snow, creating in the sinner a new heart, and renewing an upright spirit within his bowels."

EFFECTS OF THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE.

We shall now consider some of the effects of this holy sacrament and also some of the merciful provisions it contains for the salvation of sinners. The object of this sacrament, it has been already said, is to remit sin and to undo its fatal consequences. Now the first effect of mortal sin is to strike the soul dead. It cannot, it is true, rob the soul of the life and immortality proper to it as a spiritual being and a simple substance, but it destroys its supernatural life which is sanctifying grace, and brings death and damnation upon it. As the soul is the life of the body, so God is the life of the soul. It follows therefore that mortal sin by separating the soul from God brings spiritual ruin and death upon it. The soul that sinneth, says the prophet, the same shall die. (Ezekiel xviii c. 20 v.) And what a sad and awful death must be that of the soul in mortal sin! It is a fact and a law regulating the action of death that the nobler a being is in life, the more foul and loathsome it is in death. Man is the noblest being in the material creation and accordingly we find that the action of death upon him is more terrible and repulsive than on any other being of this lower world. If by this law we may judge of the death of the soul what a glimpse we catch of its dreadful state, and of the fearfully loathsome and repulsive spectacle it must present to God and to his holy angels. Lazarus dead and buried in the grave is but a type and image of a soul dead and buried in the grave of sin. If then the merciful Jesus groaned with sorrow and shed bitter tears on beholding the dead body of his friend, now stiff and cold and redolent with the foul breath and stench of the grave, must not the sight of a soul dead in sin, robbed of its supernatural life, blighted and blasted like a fallen angel and deprived of its peerless beauty and likeness to God, must not such a sight, we say, be calculated to bring tears, if that were possible, from the God that made it and the Christ that redeemed it, and to dim the very joys of heaven with the shadow of a great sorrow. Of a soul in such a state we may well say with the prophet: "to what shall I compare thee; or to what shall I liken thee; to what shall I equal thee; for great as the sea is thy destruction; who shall heal thee?" (Lamen ii. c. 13 v.) Now as Christ raised Lazarus from the dead and restored him to his home, so the sacrament of penance raises the dead soul to life and restores the sinner as a living member to the holy Church of God. This sacrament is called a sacrament of the dead because it raises souls dead in sin to the life of justice and virtue. The soul in its spiritual resurrection effected by Penance rises into a new life, puts off the foulness and repulsiveness of death and the breath and stench of the grave, and resumes its likeness to God and its former beauty and comeliness. It is no longer a dead thing, it is no longer full of the poison of sin and of the stench of the grave but it is now a living and immortal being, a thing of beauty and a joy

forever, a child of God, an heir of heaven, and a sister to the holy angels. It has ceased to be an object of loathing and of hatred to God, to grieve the loving heart of Christ and to fill the angels with sorrow, and it has become a new creature created according to God in justice and the holiness of truth; it is an object of love to the Sacred Heart of our Lord, and there is joy in heaven because a sinner has done penance and received the grace of absolution. This then is one of the great effects of the sacrament of Penance. It raises the soul dead in sin to a life of justice and grace, it effects a new creation, a new transformation, it puts off from the repentant sinner "the old man who is corrupted according to the desire of error and it clothes him with the new man who according to God is created in justice and in holiness of truth" (Ephes. iv. c. 24 v.) As the first Adam being the head of the human race involved it in his fall and communicated to it sin and death, so the new Adam, Jesus Christ, the head of redeemed and regenerated mankind communicates to them his divine life through baptism first, and then through Penance. This is what St. Paul means when he says, "as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all shall be made alive" (1st Cor. xv. c. 22v.) and also when in several places he teaches that in Christ we are made "new creatures." And this new creation effected by God through the sacrament of his infinite pity and compassion is a more gracious and more beneficent exercise of divine omnipotence, goodness, and mercy, than the material creation, than all the glories of the heavens and all the varied beauties spread abroad on the face of nature. This is doubtless the mind of the Church when she declares that the re-creation or re-formation of man through the redemption is more wonderful and more glorious than his original creation. (*Deus qui humanæ substantiæ dignitatem mirabiliter condidisti et MIRABILIS reformasti.*)

Mortal sin not only strikes the soul dead but it also destroys all the merits the sinner may have acquired and accumulated during years spent in a state of grace and in the exercise of good and holy works. It is a doctrine of faith that good, that is, supernatural works, done in a state of grace, are, by the free appointment and good-will of God meritorious of eternal life and of proportionate degrees of glory in heaven. So that every man who does acts of faith or charity or self-denial or piety will receive a reward both in this life and the next according to those actions. Every person who performs acts of virtue will receive an increase of virtue and of grace in this life; and hereafter, as the Council of Florence defines, the glory of the blessed shall be in proportion to the measure of their charity on earth. There is a link of connection between the measure of our charity here and the measure of our glory hereafter. This is what is understood by merit. Now mortal sin destroys at one blow all the merits of a whole life. No matter how many years a man may have spent in virtue and in holiness, no matter what heights of Christian perfection he may have reached; he may have had the spirit of prayer like St. Teresa, the spirit of mortification and poverty like St. Benedict Labre, the burning zeal of St. Francis Xavier, the ardent charity of St. Vincent de Paul; he may have spent years in the exercise of all those various virtues and may have spread around him in his journey through time the blessings that ever well forth from a saintly life, and the sweet fragrance, the good odour of Christ unto salvation; one sin unto death cancels all his merits as by a stroke of lightning and blots them out from the book of God's remembrance. This soul is now robbed and despoiled of all those inestimable, priceless treasures, and is wrecked and ruined beyond the power of words to describe; it is like a vine fruit-laden, utterly destroyed by a fierce storm; like some once glorious cathedral suddenly overthrown and in ruins; like a great ship sunk in the sea with all its treasures. It is indeed, in the language of inspiration, "wretched and miserable, and poor and blind and naked." (Apoc. iii. c. 17 v.) Of such a soul it may well be said:—"how is the gold become dim, the finest colour is changed, the stones of the sanctuary are scattered; the noble sons of Sion and they that were clothed with the best gold; how are they esteemed as earthen vessels, the work of the potter's hands." (Lamen iv. c. 2 v.)

Now the sacrament of penance not only restores to the penitent sinner the life of grace he had lost, but it renews and restores all his merits, of which sin had deprived him. In the sacrament of his compassion the good Samaritan takes up the poor traveller that lay by the roadside, robbed and wounded and bleeding, and he cares for him and binds up his wounds, pouring in oil and wine; and heals him and gives him back all the rich savings of his well-spent years. In the words of the prophet he restores to him "the years which the locust and the bruchus and the mildew and the palmer-worm had eaten." (Joel ii. c. 25 v.) Sin is the winter of the soul with all its desolations; Penance is the returning spring, which renews all nature, clothes the fields with verdure, the trees with leaves and blossoms and fills the woods with melody and joyousness. The sinner is the prodigal son that leaves his fathers house, goes into a distant country, spends his fortune in riotous living and is reduced