

Penance... is it out?

"No more Abstinence?" "I'll do my Thing!" "No more Fasting?" "I follow my Conscience!" ?

By Brian Moore, S.J.

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The practice of penance is at the root of the Christian life. However it is not an "in word" in present day theological journalism. So this pamphlet can have a double value. It may enlarge the vocabulary of some of our readers; its practice will solidify their spirituality. -Editor.

I: THE MEANING OF PENANCE

A Parable

The request Tom's father made of him was simple, and perfectly reasonable. The "Specials" were on - a unique opportunity. Tom yearned (even more than he himself knew, though his father knew) to possess a superb home-carpentry set. His father knew Tom's thought, and decided Tom should have the set for his birthday.

He asked Tom, giving him the money to do so, to put a deposit on it. Tom took the money but, although he passed the very shop, out of some perversity he could hardly explain to himself, simply would not enter, place the deposit and assure his possession of the set and the joy it would give him.

Consider the situation: Tom wants it, his father alone can give it to him and, in fact, gives Tom the means of acquiring it for himself. Tom, for no other reason than perversity, will not do what his father wants, and what is, really, his own desire. The loss is entirely Tom's; his father is untouched himself, but grieves for Tom and his loss.

Tom comes to his senses. It is not his own loss so much as a sense that he has wronged his father that hurts. What does he do? He says he is sorry, and some money he was going to spend on himself he uses to buy his father a small present. The time he was going to spend at the football he puts into mowing the lawns. He is particularly obedient to his mother, peaceable with the rest of the family: this, he knows, pleases his father.

Tom is doing penance: giving, denying himself some pleasure, doing something which pleases another. And as long as human beings are capable of hurting each other and being sorry for it, they will do such penance.

Love is not "never having to say you're sorry" as Love Story (the Movie) advertised itself. Love is saying you're sorry, and saying it not only in words but also in deeds. For love is realistic, and knows that the people it lives in are imperfect and, despite their love for each other, capable of hurting each other.

The Moral

God our Father gives us the desire for happiness. He gives us the means to possess it. We, to our loss not his, neglect to avail ourselves of the means given us; and we do so out of the perversity of our fallen nature. In short, we sin.

When we come to our senses, when we repent and say we are sorry, we desire to make up to God for what we have done, not to him but to ourselves, but against his best will for our best good. Flowing out of a love which enables us to say we are sorry and to show that sorrow in action, penance comes naturally into our relationship with God. And generally it will take the same forms as in the parable above - giving, self-denial, pleasing God by serving others with some cost to ourselves.

In imperfect beings, penance of this kind goes with love, with the acknowledgement of guilt, with the desire to atone.

The Many Meanings of Penance

We use the word "penance" for a number of things. Sometimes by it we mean repentance itself; at other times we mean the sacrament in which that repentance is expressed and in which we are reconciled to God and to the Church, [the Sacrament of Reconciliation]. We use it of the prayers or good works enjoined on us in that sacrament as an expression of our desire to make amends. We apply it to such ascetic practices as giving alms, fasting and so on. And of a person who practices such things we say he has a spirit of penance.

But the fact that there are many uses for the word does not breed confusion; for we can see readily enough the connection between them all.

Fundamentally, "to do penance" is to repent of a past course of action (that is, to be sorry for our faithlessness to God's covenant of love with us) and, by a change of heart, to return to God, a return expressed through renewed faithfulness to his covenant.

The Sacrament of Penance

To raise this "renouncing-returning" to a sacramental level of direct sharing in the Passion of Christ, Christ has established in his Church the Sacrament of Penance. We see, therefore, the connection between our personal repentance and the sacrament which reconciles us to the God and to the people of the Covenant.

Having done wrong, we desire to do right - to repair the damage, as it were. To do so, we impose on ourselves, or accept imposed on us, prayers or good works. Since by them we wish to express our repentance (our penitence, our penance) we naturally call them our "penance". And because we know we are constantly faithless to God (who is ever-faithful) and to his covenant in love, we know the constant need we have of penitence expressed in penance. We strive therefore for the spirit of penance.

In this way, all the meanings we attach to "penance" are inter-connected.

The Church Steps in

It is precisely to cultivate in us this spirit of penance that the Church urges or commands regular acts of penance, and sets aside seasons of penance such as Lent. For if we have the spirit of penance

then, clearly, we have a sense of God's faithfulness and our own faithlessness to his covenant of love.

In short, a personal experience of love is the motive and purpose of penance.

Other Motives

We usually connect penance primarily with our personal guilt; but the long practice of the Church teaches us that there are other valid motives for the practice of penance. We can use it to help us achieve self-mastery, to make atonement for the sins of the world, to win from God (how inadequate language is: but we know what we mean) grace, or particular graces, or to imitate Christ our Lord.

Penance and Realism

Whatever the motive, penance, like love, is realistic. It revolves around the great realities in the life of a man, in the history of mankind. Penance, that is to say, revolves around God and sin and the person of Christ our Lord, mediator between God and man who, by his passion and death atoned for man's sin and was raised from the dead as a sign to man that his sacrifice on man's behalf had been accepted.

II: OBJECTIONS TO PENANCE

Is it Morbid?

It should hardly be necessary, but it might be just as well to point out, right from the start, that the practice of Christian penance differs essentially from, say, masochism or any other psychological aberration.

It differs in motive in that, one way or another, all Christian penance is motivated by the love of Christ. It differs, also, in that the Christian who practices penance knows that the flesh profits nothing, it is the spirit which gives life. In other words, he knows that his bodily penance is intelligible only in the light of interior sorrow for sin and the desire to realize one aspect of his being a Christian - his being, with Christ, a victim for sin. It is intelligible only in view of the "imperishable crown" for which, as St. Paul says, we strive, bringing the body into subjection.

It differs, further, in that it is always under the moderating rule of reason and of the Spirit. It differs in that the Christian has no hatred for the body in which he practices penance, but reveres it as a member of Christ, as a temple of the Spirit, and as destined for a glorious resurrection and re-shaping in the image of Christ's own risen body.

Negative or Creative?

Even in Catholic writings it will be found said that voluntary penance is "negative". Apart from the fact that a voluntary act which is negative is a contradiction in terms, this view is sadly deficient.

For one thing, it entirely ignores the aim of all penance (active or passive) which is, ultimately, that likeness to Christ which is the positive goal of all striving.

Such critics, having declared active and voluntary penance to be "negative" usually go on to contrast it unfavourably with the passive acceptance of the trials of life. Undeniably, there is an active element in such acceptance, but on several counts it is an inadequate expression of the Christian spirit of penance.

It is not merely that, when all is said and done, in most people's lives really shattering personal catastrophes are few. Life itself, viewed in its most "merely natural" aspect demands that we take the rough with the smooth, simply as a matter of being human. To regard every minor irritation, difficulty, frustration and disappointment met with in living as something of a martyrdom suggests a pretty low opinion of the whole business of living, even as a "purely natural" enterprise.

More important, here acceptance does not call into play Christian creativity in this respect. Christ our Lord is the creator from all eternity of the very conditions of his sacrifice, his passion and death. In imitation of him, a Christian will actively create for himself opportunities for sharing in and for imitating Christ in that passion of his.

Disfiguring?

It is also suggested that a spirit of penance is incompatible with a realization of the fact that we are a redeemed and restored humanity: resurrection men whose song is Alleluia. It is suggested that, somehow, actual penance is something grown out of by a Christianity which "has come of age" in wisdom and maturity.

Such an objection, if pressed, would necessarily demand the non-existence of all evil, physical and moral in a world redeemed and restored. The fact that humanity, redeemed by the blood of Christ and restored in his resurrection, is still capable of great evil means that the on-going process of redemption and restoration is still, in comparison with "the glory that will be revealed in us", imperfect; and susceptible of perfection in the individual in the same way as St. Paul writes, "I make up in my own self what is lacking to the sufferings of Christ".

As always, in Christ our Lord himself we find the readiest answer. The eternal Son, found "in the likeness of sinful flesh" is even in that condition, nevertheless "full of grace and truth", "and of his fullness we have all received". That is to say, the Word was incarnate in human nature precisely as it is under the domination of the powers of darkness; and was nevertheless the fullness and source of grace. In other words, the spirit of penance is quite compatible with the most exalted holiness, as is verified in those true followers of Christ, the saints.

Inhuman?

Objection is further made on the grounds that penance is somehow unfitting a human being as such. Discipline and self-denial in all sorts of ways may laudably be practised for all sorts of ends (for athletic, social, health, body-beautiful, money-making reasons) and a generally spartan kind of life can still draw praise. But once a religious motive enters in, the same things somehow become inhuman, even slightly sinister.

A man can sacrifice sleep for the purpose of prolonging his day's money-making activity, and be praised for it. If he foregoes sleep as a penitential practice, "there's something odd there". A man can diet to lose weight, or give up smoking for his health's sake, and be highly commended. If he eats frugally or gives up pleasurable pastimes out of a spirit of penance he will most likely be regarded as some kind of nut.

Christ our Lord warns us in advance, "The flesh avails nothing; it is only the spirit gives life". Penance is an activity which transpires in the realm of faith; and, as with all activities of the spirit, the flesh (the merely natural man) looks on with complete incomprehension, unable to see even the inconsistency of allowing as good something done from the most natural of motives but decrying it as unnatural when it is done for religious motives.

So St. Paul points out how athletes subdue themselves: "and they, indeed, strive for a perishable crown, we for an imperishable."

III: PENANCE AND THE PASSION OF CHRIST

The Passion of Christ

Any consideration of penance needs to commence with the Passion of Our Lord; for, in that passion of Christ, are exemplified the aims we have in view when we practice penance: the mastery of self, atonement for sin, the winning of God's grace. Moreover, it is in the blood of Christ shed in his passion that the new Covenant is established; and just as sin is faithlessness to that covenant, so penance is tied up with a return to faithfulness to it.

And finally, it is Christ in his passion to whom we must unite ourselves through imitation of him in order to share in his resurrection: and the object of all penance is resurrection.

Resurrection

For man, resurrection is the total redemption of the whole man. Man is, as it were, "born doubly dead": metaphorically "dead" in soul because lacking the divine life God willed him to possess, and possessing which he created him; and destined to death in body because of sin.

Redemption consists essentially in man's being given a double resurrection corresponding to this double death: resurrection in soul when through grace we recover the divine life in us; resurrection in body when Christ will raise our mortal bodies and make them like his own in glory.

The loss of the divine life is the essence of sin; being destined to death in body is the consequence of sin. For bodily death is, as it were, the sacrament of sin - the sign and seal of sin. Bodily death manifests the fact that sin has entered the world; and it would seal for ever, by making it irretrievably permanent, our separation from God.

Bodily resurrection is the sacrament, as it were, of grace - the sign and seal of grace. It is a sign that "where sin has abounded grace has more abounded". It manifests the fact that grace has been restored to man; it makes permanent the re-union with God which, through grace, is given to the whole man.

Christ Redeems

In us, death is the sign of our sin. In Christ, death is the sign of others' sin. Himself sinless, Christ freely takes upon himself the death which he is not liable to, and in his blameless death our death is put to death. Dying, he destroyed our death; rising, he restored our life.

But, although in principle we are already fully redeemed, already "seated with Christ in glory", yet, for the attainment of the full effects of redemption within us we must wait until he comes in glory.

Christ's Sacrifice

The essential of Christ's sacrifice is the total submission of himself in mind and will to the will of the Father, for sin is a rebellion against God's will by the will of man. The completeness of this submission of Christ is manifested by the extremity of his death. The passion and death of Christ are the exterior sacrifice he offers manifesting the interior sacrifice he makes of his own will.

Christ's Passion in us

The saving power of Christ's sacrifice is made effective in us when, through the gift of God, we submit ourselves in mind and will to God through faith and charity. Doing this, we die to sin and come alive once more to God.

Sorrow for sin, then, may be regarded as penance of the spirit. Without such sorrow, penance of the body is nothing; with such sorrow, penance of the body becomes the sign of our penitence of spirit. And because of the body-spirit nature of man, our bodily penance helps us to ever-greater penance of spirit, sorrow for sin.

By their union with the passion of Christ, the afflictions of this life, whether voluntary or involuntary but accepted in a spirit of atonement, are the passion of Christ in us. Hence the Church in administering the Sacrament of Penance prays that whatever good we do, whatever evil we suffer may gain for us the forgiveness of sin, an increase of grace and the reward of eternal life.

IV: PENANCE AND THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

Interior and Exterior

Interior penance (penance of the spirit, sorrow for sin) is the supreme necessity. Exterior penance, bodily penance that is, is its sign: it is a sign to ourselves that our sorrow is genuine, since it is willing to overflow into deeds; it is a sign to the Christian community that we are actively sharing in the Church's on-going process of self-purification and Christ's continuing redemptive activity among men.

Interior penance is the supreme necessity. Exterior, bodily penance is its promoter, helping us to achieve an ever-greater sense of reality in our sorrow for sin.

"In" for Ever

If we regard penance, therefore, primarily as atonement for our sin, and see penance as something which goes hand in hand with sorrow for sin, then there can be no question of penances ever being "out". For there can never be an end to our need to enter into the passion of Christ in order to share his resurrection.

The Sins of the World

As individuals, we are guilty, sinful men. But we belong, also, to a guilty, sinful race. Even the Church herself (the spotless Bride of Christ and his own Body) must be forever purifying herself; for she, too, will attain her full perfection only in the glory of heaven.

As he is the example we follow in our atonement for our own sins, so is Christ the model we follow in our atonement for the sins of the world.

Lamb of God

Christ is the true paschal lamb, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. The shedding of his blood enables us to accomplish our passover, our passing over from death to life, from the slavery of sin to the liberty of the sons of God, from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of the light of Christ. The shedding of his blood cleanses our conscience from evil deeds to serve the living God. His blood is the more precious than gold and silver which purchased the redemption of all mankind.

Together with Christ

Everything that a Christian is and has, he is and possesses because of Christ; and not only because of Christ but actually in Christ and with Christ.

If a Christian is a son of God it is because he is one with Christ, the Son of God. If he has the sure hope of everlasting life it is because of Christ who, taking the nature of man, with that nature penetrated the heavens and sits at the Father's right hand. If he has been freed from sin it is because Christ has conquered sin; and if death has no more the victory over him it is because Christ died and rose from the dead and rising dies no more.

Everything Christ has, even his godhead, he gives to share in to those who become one with him. He is the eternal high priest of God; and Christians are a royal priesthood, able to offer to God the same acceptable sacrifice which Christ offered - himself.

Christ is the Lamb of God, the victim for the sins of the world. The Christian, too, is a lamb of God, sharing in the victim-hood of Christ. All that the Christian suffers, therefore, can become, in union with Christ's own, a sacrifice making atonement for the sins of the world.

In the Likeness of Christ

When a Christian, therefore, practices penance he perfects the image of the Lamb of God that is in him; and he acts out his role as lamb of God and victim for sin on behalf of the world. He makes up in his own body what is wanting to the sufferings of Christ on behalf of the Church.

It is a sort of dishonesty to want to be priest with Christ, offering to God the same sacrifice as that of the Cross, and to wish, at the same time, to escape being victim with Christ in that same sacrifice.

The thing about Christ our Lord's sacrifice is its complete voluntariness; and, inasmuch as, being God, he is the creator of all things, he is creator from all eternity of the very conditions of his sacrifice, his passion and his death.

For a Christian, then, it will not be (generally speaking) sufficient only to accept the trials of life and any load of pain or disappointment with which it may burden him. He will, in imitation of Christ, voluntarily create for himself, according to his capacity, the means of perfecting his likeness to Christ the victim for sin by the practice of some voluntary penance.

V. PENANCE AND THE CHURCH TODAY

The Council Speaks

Vatican II reaffirmed all the traditional aspects of the practice of Christian penance. In the decree on the Liturgy we read in paragraphs 109, and 110:

The Lenten season has a two-fold character: (1) it recalls baptism and prepares for it; (2) it stresses a penitential spirit. By these means especially, Lent gets ready the faithful for celebrating the paschal mystery after a period of closer attention to the Word of God and more ardent prayer. In the Liturgy itself, and in liturgy-centred instructions, these baptismal and penitential themes should be emphasized. Hence:

(a) wider use is to be made of the baptismal features . . .

(b) The same approach holds for the penitential elements. As regards instruction, it is important to impress on the minds of the faithful not only the social consequences of sin but also the fact that the real essence of the virtue of penance is hatred for sin as an offence against God; the role of the

Church in penitential practices is not to be passed over; and the people must be exhorted to pray for sinners.

During Lent, penance should be not only internal and individual but also external and social. The practice of penance should be fostered according to the possibilities of the present day . . . Such practice should be encouraged.

Coming from the decree on the Liturgy, this quotation naturally emphasizes the practice of penance during Lent, for Lent is a liturgical Season. Note how the Council reaffirms all the traditional elements of penance: that it is primarily interior and consists in sorrow for sin; that this interior sorrow overflows into external penance, offered in reparation for sin as an offence against God, whether the sin be our own or that of others.

The Council does not, however, confine the practice of penance to the Season of Lent; it mentions penance in other contexts, also. And it is in these other contexts that we find the Council reaffirming the Christian tradition of the use of penance for the winning of grace or graces from God.

For example, speaking of the Church's missionary activity, the Council notes that all the faithful hold the commission for the spread of the faith and the growth of the Body of Christ. This obligation and privilege of their membership of Christ's Body is fulfilled, firstly, "by leading a profoundly Christian life". And, then:

from this renewed spirit, prayer and works of penance will be spontaneously offered to God that he may make the work of missionaries fruitful by his grace. Then missionary vocations will be generated, and the resources which missions need will be forthcoming.

Again, in its writing on the formation of priests, the Council notes that "the task of fostering vocations devolves on the whole Christian community"; and in the implementation of this task:

This holy Synod gives primary commendation to the traditional means of joint effort, such as persevering prayer and Christian mortification.

The Church's Law

The performance of regular penance is still commanded by Church law. It is true that the Church's laws regarding penance have changed in the sense that the law no longer (except in rare cases such as Good Friday) specifies what penance is to be performed. But the Church's attitude towards and her teaching regarding penance have not changed.

Nor in fact has her law itself changed all that much. We are still bound, if we do not observe the Friday abstinence, to perform some other act of penance of our own choosing on that day. And a constant and deliberate neglect of this law is regarded as a grave matter.

Illiberal?

You may see it lamented that the Church, in this matter of her laws regarding penance, treats us as mature Christians on the one hand by abolishing the specific commands, but on the other still treats us as children inasmuch as she still commands penance to be done.

The objection is rather unreal. The Church would fail in her duty to us if, considering the importance of penance, she failed to urge it, or if, considering human weakness, she failed to command the practice of penance.

Curiously, you will find this objection to community penance maintained side by side with an insistence that the whole people of God, the pilgrim Church as a whole, is in constant need of communal, not merely individual purification. If, then, penance has validity for the individual, it certainly has communal validity; and we notice that in both the Old and New Testaments the penitential practice of fasting was very much a community activity.

The sign of a universally imposed penance must not be overlooked if this traditional religious practice is to achieve its full significance.

VI: PENANCE IN THE SCRIPTURES

The Old Testament

Throughout the Old Testament, we find frequent mention of the use of penance to signify repentance or to win God's favour for some specific end, and days of fasting were often proclaimed for the whole people in the name of God himself. To fast, to lie in ashes, to dress in sackcloth were common accompaniments to private and, even, communal penance; and repeatedly the praises of almsgiving are sung.

When David's child by the wife of Uriah fell ill, David pleaded with the Lord for the life of the child. He kept a strict fast, and went home and spent the night on the bare ground, covered with sackcloth . . . I fasted and wept (he said) because I kept thinking, Who knows? Perhaps the Lord will take pity on me and the child will live.

In times of national calamity or on more solemn occasions the proclamation of a fast, "a summons to fast in the presence of the Lord", was commonly imposed on the whole population of a city. So we find that in the face of the threatened destruction of Nineveh the people of Nineveh believed in God; they proclaimed a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least.

And if God frequently threatens to refuse to accept their fasting (as he does also their sacrifices) it is because on occasion their action was only an empty gesture, unaccompanied by that change of heart which gives penance its value and which penance itself both signifies and promotes.

In the Gospels

So in the New Testament, Christ Our Lord warns us against the same thing. Mere ritualism, formalism, the outward shell of religious acts is not enough; the heart must be in them. Moreover, the performance of religious actions must be guarded against their being corrupted by hypocrisy or vainglory and pride.

Our Lord instructs us:

When you fast, do not put on a gloomy look as the hypocrites do: they pull long faces to let men know they are fasting. I tell you solemnly, they have had their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face so that no one will know that you are fasting except your Father who sees all that is done in secret; and your Father who sees all that is done in secret will reward you.

So, too, he speaks of giving alms in secret and of praying in secret.

Note that Our Lord does not suggest we cease from performing these traditional kinds of penance. Indeed, he implies that we will continue these practices: when you fast, when you pray, when you give alms; and on the occasion of the disciples' failure to exorcise the possessed child he draws attention to the necessity of prayer and fasting.

The Acts of the Apostles

In the Acts of the Apostles we read of the apostles fasting, as in the early chapters of St. Luke's Gospel we read the praise of the venerable Simeon and Anna who allied fasting with assiduity in prayer.

This ideal of combining the personal and communal practice of fasting with prayer and ministry was continued by the apostles and the early Christian communities. We read in the Acts:

One day while they were offering worship to the Lord and keeping a fast, the Holy Spirit said, "I want Barnabas and Saul set apart for the work to which I have called them". So it was that after prayer and fasting they laid hands on them and sent them off.

The practice of penance, therefore, is a religious tradition honourably enshrined in our Christian Scriptures.

VII: PENANCE IN OUR LIVES

The Example of the Saints

The example of the saints teaches us, and the saints have traditionally been much given to the practice of penance. We learn from them not what kind of penances we should practice (these things are greatly conditioned by historical circumstances) or the degree to which we should practise them (for this is the work of the Holy Spirit); what we learn from them is that penance must have a place in our lives. It is up to us to decide how great a place, and with what kind of penance that place will be filled.

Not in a Vacuum

But penance is not something practised in a vacuum. Together with prayer and service it is woven into the ordinary fabric of our daily lives. As each man has for himself to harmonize (as it were) his "spiritual life" with his "ordinary life", so each man has to determine for himself the part a spirit of penance will have in his life and what particular penances will express that spirit.

In saying this much, it was found to use an "as it were" and, twice, inverted commas; for language never really expresses the wholeness of living. A Christian lives always and in every respect precisely as a Christian. But he still needs to attend to the various dimensions of this his life; and in doing so can only treat them as if they were separable entities. In reality, of course, a Christian life is not so much one in which is found joy, worship, penance, service, concern etc.; it is, rather, a joyful, penitential, committed, etc., style of living.

Aims and Means

Initially, a person's penance is generally directed towards reparation for his own sins and to helping overcome particular faults. In this latter business, good resolutions are all very well; but human nature being what it is, not much progress is made unless one penalizes oneself for failure to carry out one's resolve.

That is to say, if one is aiming seriously at curbing a fault, say, of the tongue, one will not get far unless the good resolution is accompanied by a careful examination of motives, by prayer and by a self-imposed penance for failures.

Other aims, of course, enter in: reparation for the sins of the world, the achieving of a likeness to Christ (of which the correction of faults is a specification), the achieving of a generalized Christian simplicity of life.

Making a Start

The direction that penance will take, its expression, that is to say, will depend largely on personal taste; but the saints generally direct our attention to two or three areas in which penance is easily and usefully practised: the matter of eating and drinking, the question of sleep, the use of recreation and other pleasures.

In these matters the saints point out two things: first, that mere moderation is not penance; and, secondly, that duty to one's health and the ability to serve others must be safeguarded. If a particular kind of penance makes a person difficult to live with it is, clearly, to be dropped forthwith.

Saint Paul urges his Christians to work so that they will be able to give alms. For our day, this would seem to be a most suitable kind of penance, also: gratuitous work for others, the foregoing of some pleasure or recreation, devoting the money saved to some charitable purpose, additional work undertaken and its payment given as alms, and so on.

So is charity united with penance or, rather, penance with charity; and charity is the supreme Christian virtue.
