

A Call to do Penance

2nd Sunday of Advent (A) - Mt 3:1-12

Ave Maria Catholic Church, December 4, 2022 - Fr. David M Vidal

After prayer, penance is the most effective means for cleansing the soul of past faults and even for guarding it against future ones.

When Our Lord is about to begin His public ministry, St. John the Baptist announces: *“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand . . . Prepare the way of the Lord, make his path straight,”* (Mt 3: 2-3) St. John the Baptist relates the preparation of the Lord’s path with the action of penance: *“Do penance: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”* (Mt 3:2)

Then, Jesus Himself declares that his mission is to call sinners to repentance: *“I came not to call the just, but sinners to penance.”* (Lk 5:32).

This virtue is so necessary, that the Lord instructs us: *“Unless you do penance, you shall all likewise perish,”* (Lk 13:5).

The Apostles understood this doctrine so well that from the very first moments of their mission, they insisted on the necessity of penance: *“Do penance: and be baptized every one of you,”* (Act 11:38).

Penance is an act of justice. After having offended God, reparation is needed. And reparation is made possible through acts of charity and penance.

Penance is a supernatural virtue.

Penance is related to the virtue of justice, which inclines the sinner to detest his sin because it is an offense against God, and to make a firm resolution of avoiding sin in the future, and of atoning for it.

1) In the light of faith, we see that sin is an evil, the greatest evil of our lives because it offends God and deprives us of the most precious gift of our existence, that is, friendship with God. This evil we must hate with our whole soul: *“I have hated iniquity.”*

2) Moreover, conscious that this evil is ours since we have sinned, we conceive a lively sorrow because the separation from God weighs upon us. For this reason, sincere contrition and a deep sense of humiliation must follow our examination of conscience.

3) To avoid in the future this terrible evil, we must have a firm determination to avoid it, by carefully fighting dangerous occasions of sin, and by fortifying our wills.

4) Finally, realizing that sin constitutes an act of injustice, we determine to atone for it by works of penance and mercy.

We must acquire a spirit of penance

Doing penance is not just for beginners! Doing penance is not just an action reserved for a selected group of people. No wonder the Church renews the call for penance every Advent and Lenten season.

Once we understand that sin is an infinite offense to God, we must do penance all through life, since a whole lifetime is but too short to make reparation for an offense against our God and Creator.

The lack of sorrow for sins leads to a lack of understanding of the need for penance. This point is so important that Father Frederick Faber, after giving much thought to the reason why so many souls make but little progress, concluded that the cause is “*the lack of sorrow for sin.*”

In his book, “Growth in Holiness,” Father Faber says: “*All holiness has lost its principle of growth if it is separated from abiding sorrow for sin. For the principle of growth is not only love but forgiven love.*”

The Practice of the Virtue of Penance

To practice the virtue of penance, we must unite ourselves to the atoning Christ, and ask Him to dwell within us, so we start living through Him, with Him, and in Him. We must have His sentiments and join in His acts of penance. Through Christ, with Christ, and in Christ, a trial becomes a moment of redemption, a moment of salvation and glory.

What kind of trials must be endured? Sometimes, we are ready to choose some penances and trials, but not necessarily the ones that we are supposed to bear. Perhaps because we are more interested in the recognition and the glory that those sufferings bring than in the spiritual values, they bring to us and others.

To avoid a lack of right intention, let us accept all the crosses that Divine Providence may see fit to send us. The crosses that we find in life are not instruments of torture, but instruments of salvation.

If we see them in this way, we will face our physical and moral trials with faith, hope, and love. With faith: knowing that the sufferings of the present life cannot be compared to the glory that will be revealed. With hope: knowing that the one who suffers with Christ, will also reign with Christ. And with love: understanding that love demands a complete union

with the beloved, and the one who loves Christ wants to imitate him and share the cross with Him.

Accepting the trials that Divine Providence allows us to endure also means assuming our daily responsibilities and duties of our state of life in a spirit of penance and reparation.

In the duties of our state, we find the manifest expression of God's will for us. To fulfill them and to offer them as a perpetual offering to God from morning until night should mark our day.

Let us never forget that we have gold in our hands if we learn how to use it. Every one of us must fulfill obligations and responsibilities according to the proper state of life: Let us examine the sacrifices that we make every day. Now, let us give meaning to them. Let us offer them as our acceptable offering to God, for God's glory, the salvation of our souls, and the salvation of many souls, particularly, those who are closest to us.

Let us prepare the way of the Lord by offering our daily trials and sacrifices.

There is an old prayer, which was usually said by the priest after absolving the penitent. This prayer sums up with striking words not only the way, but also the essence of the spirit of penance: *"May whatever good act you do and whatever suffering you bear be a help to you for the remission of sins,"* Amen.