

LENTEN PENANCE

THE EDITOR

BY the time this issue of *THE LIFE* appears the good Christian will have found himself enclosed within the penitential season of Lent. If he is an observant Christian he may well have been comparing the present practice of Lenten penance with that of even twenty years ago, when the majority of Catholics for forty days had to be content with one proper meal a day. Now he begins with a flourish on Ash Wednesday and for the rest of the season until Good Friday he finds himself still 'benefiting' by the war-time dispensations. As an observant Christian he may wonder whether he is not likely to grow lax and flabby in his spiritual life without the authoritative command to do penance in a precise and clearly defined manner. His mind may turn to the more recent visions of our Lady, who at Lourdes and Fatima, for example, seemed to encourage not only a revival in the spirit of prayer, but also in the spirit and practice of penance. The Christian people, he may deliberate within himself, seem ready to respond to the appeal to prayer in such movements as the Rosary crusade, but lag behind like children on the way to school when it comes to the matter of mortification; indeed they seem to do considerably less mortification since our Lady's appeal than they did before in the stricter, if more puritanical, century preceding our own.

Is there any reason in these surmises of the observant Christian? On the face of it we must answer Yes. In 'the good old days' the Church insisted on a strict and easily comprehended set of rules of fast and abstinence throughout the forty days of Lent and on the other three sets of ember days as well as on certain vigils spread out across the year. Besides this common observance for all Christians there existed an army of religious men and women, headed by the Trappists and Carthusians, who were noted perhaps above everything else for the rigours of their life of mortification. Over and above all this there were the saints whose lives were dominated, at least in the eyes of their hagiographers, by the desire to reduce their flesh to mere skin and bone by constant fasts and harsh treatment such as sleeping on a bed of broken pots.

All this clearly defined practice seems to have given place to a wider and vaguer view of Christian self-denial in which the

initiative and the methods are left far more to the responsibility of the individual Christian. He finds himself with the burden of choice as to whether he should do penance and how he should do it. The reason for this change of emphasis appears to be that the present century has witnessed a return to hardships and sufferings which hitherto had been regarded as proper only to primitive and barbarous times. Wars and persecutions, a change in the constitution of most 'civilized' men, have made it increasingly difficult to legislate for the generality in a universal Church. There is perhaps less choice in the standard which a man may adopt in his living; he can only live according to the measure into which he is born, a measure that has little margin beyond the bare essentials of life. Of course this is by no means a universal state, since there are many who still live in comfort and even affluence; but the numbers of those who feel themselves almost on the edge of the subsistence level has considerably increased so that there would be more people who had to be dispensed from the laws of fasting than those who could observe them.

This state of affairs then leaves the larger number of Christians in what might be called a penitential situation, a condition of life which contains the suffering and hardships that are the materials of penance. It may be that our Lady's call to penance is addressed in a special manner to these people that, realizing the true nature of mortification, they may begin to transform these materials into penitential Christian living, so as to overcome the evils of our generation by turning them into part of the redemptive act of Christ. But the difficulty for so many Christians is that they do not realize the true nature of penance. They still consider it to be a question of 'giving-up' certain non-essentials, if not giving up two or more satisfying meals in the day, then giving up sweets or tobacco or sugar in their tea. Beyond this they think of special mortification in terms of disciplines, hair-shirts and chains or bitter herbs. And none of these things is essential to true Christian penance.

The word 'penance' has come to stand for quite a number of things and for that reason it is not always easy to recognize the essentials when we have to take the initiative at such times as the beginning of Lent or when we suddenly hear our Lady's call to penance as a personal demand upon ourselves. First of all the word may stand simply for the raw material already mentioned, the

actual suffering or hardship which of itself is not constructive of anything. Sufferings or deprivations are not virtuous and from the individual's part may be merely a passive state against which one may rebel. Poverty, for example, is an absence of good things rather than a good thing itself, and there are many who are restless and complaining under its burden. In this sense penance requires a positive attitude of mind and act of the will to convert it into part of the Christian way of perfection. This is another meaning of the word, an interior virtuous act which may perhaps be called 'penitence' or 'repentance', a sorrow for sins committed. St John the Baptist's call to penance was primarily a call to this interior repentance, demanding of his hearers that they should turn again towards God with a recognition of the error of their ways. Exteriorly, flowing from this virtuous interior penitence, penance can mean the satisfaction undertaken by the penitent in making amends for his sins, the fasts and abstinences, the prayers and self-inflicted hardships which are imposed by divine authority through the Church and the confessor or director. Voluntary mortifications—going without salt at meals, sleeping on the floor, wearing hair-shirts—these come under this heading of penitential exercises. But enclosing all the meanings of the word is the sacrament of Penance which requires the interior act of repentance, the exterior removal of sin through the priestly absolution and the acts of satisfaction which are imposed as an integral part of the sacrament. And no study of penance would be more profitable and all-embracing than that of this sacrament. Indeed, anyone wishing to understand our Lady's meaning or desiring to keep the spirit of Lent in the way the Church requires should meditate all the elements of the sacrament of penance, contrition, confession, satisfaction and absolution.

In every case the word 'penance' can only be understood in relation to sin. It is concerned in various ways with the destruction of sin. And that is surely at the root of our Lady's call—that in this sinful age all Christians should set their minds resolutely to destroy the evil. This destruction of sin implies, of course, first and foremost the turning away from evil and the cleaving to God that are essential elements in contrition and indeed in a true Christian life. But it implies, too, the willing acceptance of the fruits or physical effects of sin. It was through Adam's and Eve's first pride and disobedience that human hardships, sufferings and death came

into the world, and, as St Paul points out, the great act of penance on the Cross was essentially the willing, obedient acceptance of these effects by the Son of God, the second Adam. The Christian's penance is primarily that of continuing the work of redemption by the willing, obedient acceptance of the suffering and hardships that come to him in one way or another from the will of God but also from the results of men's evil ways. Thus, for example, every sin eventually has its repercussions on society, so that it is possible for a Christian to help to remove sins of injustice by accepting the poverty in which he finds himself as a result of this injustice on the part of other people. A man may assist in redeeming the sins that have led to war by embracing the pain and insecurity of the effects of war. This is surely the basic element of Christian penance, not first to look about for ways of, even temporarily, increasing one's own discomforts and hardships, but first to take hold of those discomforts which are one's inescapable lot and to accept them voluntarily, thereby converting them from a negative evil into a positive way of establishing the good, virtuous Christian life.

Care must, however, be taken to keep true perspective; for the principal means of abolishing sin is the act of the love of God, Christian charity. Love alone can effectively and finally remove sin and its effects; and no willing acceptance of hardship will achieve anything without this positive virtue. We all recognize the futility of 'offering up' the unpleasant things of life in a spirit of sour bitterness or merely stoical indifference. Penance is so often rendered ineffectual through the lack of love. People who put up with their poverty while they hate the human society which has brought it about only succeed in drying up their own souls till there is nothing left within them but an acid which corrodes everything about them. That is not penance. The first call of every Christian at the beginning of Lent is to an increase of love, and with love then to transform the hardships and pains of the time into the work of redemption. Prayer and penance are thus combined and our Lady's express wish fulfilled.