

FREEDOM IN PENANCE

THE EDITOR

TO continue and to conclude the theme we have been developing in the two preceding issues of *THE LIFE* we would wish to insist that true Christian penance and asceticism is based not on a rejection or despising of things natural and human but on a true detachment from every creature. The Christian should only reject evil, for all good is in some way from God: and the only complete evil is sin which is to be set on one side, trampled under foot, rejected by true penance. The penance that we do is designed to abolish the evil of sin and its effects. The creatures of God, from our Lord's humanity and our Blessed Lady down to the tiniest atom of matter, have proceeded from the Source of all good and retain a share in that goodness so long as they continue to exist. Such things are not to be rejected.

By detachment, however, the Christian frees himself from the trammels of all these good things. He may only be completely attached to God, and to the godly element in the things God has made. This applies to the whole run of creation. It is possible, for example, to become attached to our Lady on the purely human level and so to be drawn into superstition. It is often this that the non-Catholic suspects, as a rule quite erroneously, in Catholic devotion to the Mother of God—the unreal sentiment, the magical trust in mere repetition of prayers, the attempt to clothe her with every possible quality, even those, such as the priesthood, which the Church has declared incompatible with her nature. The Christian must be detached from his Rosary and his Novenas, from his Fatima shrines and his pictures of our Lady of Good Counsel, which is to say that he may not be attached to these things. He is attached to our Lady because she is the Mother of God and has the godly element to the full—'full of grace'. If need be he can discover her and obtain her intercession without the use of his beads; so that there may be occasions when the principle of Christian penance must be employed even in such matters. The same penance is obviously demanded in the sphere of the liturgy, with its engaging delights for ear and eye and even for the nose as the trained Gregorian choir chants its Easter Alleluia's round the

newly lit Paschal Candle at midnight with the rising cloud of incense catching its yellow rays. Here, even when the Lenten season of penance has just ceased, detachment must not be foregone—the choir may sing out of tune but the Christian should not be deflected from his joy in the rising of the Sun of Justice. Again in the greatest gift in the natural order, that of human friendship, the principle of detachment must be there to purify the union of two human persons and keep their affection within the wider love of the Blessed Trinity. In these more perfect goods of nature the possibility of attachment is far greater, the bonds of nature stronger and more all-embracing, so that Christian penance has to play a more powerful if more subtle part therein.

In other words the principle of penance is that of freedom, not the merely negative technique of non-attachment which seems to have been preached by some of the more mystically-minded of modern writers, but the exercise of free will liberated from the slavery of being determined and led by the lesser-goods of creation. Even in a true human love or in the divine liturgy a man may be led by the nose and be in fact unable to choose for himself.

Penance or mortification, as we have seen, is essentially an exercise of the will, freely choosing to undergo the necessities of life and even of death as imposed by the will of God, following the obedience of Christ to the Cross. This penitential exercise brings with it a true freedom in which the Christian's will may co-operate to the full with divine grace. Thus the unmortified man who follows the whims of his senses becomes engaged by his pain if he is struck down by some dreaded disease like cancer. Previously bound a slave by the things of this world which he enjoys, he is now equally a slave to the discomfort or agony that he suffers. By the exercise of penance the true Christian can still stand outside his pain and view it against the wider canvas of God's designing, seeing in it a way of making amends for his sin and of uniting in the act of universal redemption on Calvary. He is free because he has freely chosen to suffer whatever God should have willed for him.

Thus Christian penance does not aim simply at liberating a man by non-attachment so that he may remain stoically calm and content even in adversity. That has been called a sort of 'athlete's penance'—for the athlete denies himself many legitimate pleasures of food or drink or recreation in order that he may become a

greater master of himself in the matter of muscle and agility. But a man who practises a type of non-attachment simply that he may attain a sort of human freedom from his circumstances, an independence in the midst of a determined world, is likely to be the more strongly attached to himself, the centre of his own little world. True Christian penance prepares a man to choose death for himself, according as God has decreed it, the smashing of his own centre—that the one Centre of all may draw him into its orbit, that life may the more abound. He becomes untrammelled even by the strongest bonds of all, his self-love and ambition for human perfection. And this can only be understood and undertaken when a man has recognized the evil of sin and its consequent devastation as it divides creation up into a myriad conflicting little centres of human wills. True freedom can thus only be gained by the apparent abandonment of human free will to the enveloping choice of God, drawing all things to himself.

In this way it will be seen that the first essential in the matter of Christian penance is not to look around for what are known as 'voluntary mortifications'. People who are anxious to 'do penance' often seek about for somewhat romantic methods and instruments, eating bitter herbs, sleeping on the floor, wearing chains and hair shirts. These things certainly belong to the exercise of free will, but quite often they do not effect the liberation that penance should achieve. Being subject to the free choice of the individual, and yet in themselves usually material things, they can enslave their devotees as strongly as the pleasurable goods of the senses. The mortifications which are truly liberating are those which God chooses, and it is these that 'voluntary mortifications' often seek to evade. A person who has a sense of guilt at his frequent failures to keep his temper and his constant uncharitable criticisms may decide to mortify himself with a self-imposed fast. And this may only be an attempt to escape from his circumstances if all the time the neighbour or relative who is the source of his annoyance, irritation and uncharity is not accepted as the cross which God is imposing, the mortification which offers a true liberation in the voluntary acceptance of what is perhaps in itself inescapable. The fast will do no good until the Christian has decided to feast his impossible relative every day that he has to share his roof with him. Such mortifications which God lays on a Christian are the true penances and lead to true freedom. The

'voluntary mortifications' are little more than expressions of willingness to bear the cross which the Lord has decreed. And even so any important voluntary mortification should only be undertaken with some sort of permission or authorization from confessor or director in order to remove it from the exclusive sphere of personal choice and submit it to the authority of the will of God.

It may be noted in this connection that often the very situations which are causing us most frequently to sin are those in which our spiritual progress is most assured. The difficult situation which makes a man unhappy, restive, critical and rebellious is a sacramental, an outward sign of special graces offered to him by God who does not tempt him beyond his strength nor put him into a position in which he has not the divine power of grace at hand to support him. Any attempt at escape will make the occasion of grace, of special, perhaps heroic, charity and fortitude, an occasion of sin.

Quite simply, therefore, Christian penance is essentially the honest and deliberate attempt to co-operate with the will of God in the effects in particular of the sins of mankind. This was the way of the Cross for Christ and is the way of the cross for the Christian of all times.

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