

Penance in our Spiritual Life

The year 1917 was a year marked by great trials and suffering. The world was in the midst of the Great War, the War to end all Wars. Countries dissatisfied by the fleeting pleasures of the senses were on the brink of revolution. In the midst of all this, Mary appears to three shepherd children in Fatima, Portugal. The wise and the learned – they would not listen to her; the powerful rulers – they could not comprehend her message. Lucia, age 10, Francisco, age 8, and Jacinta, age 7, the simple and humble, were open to her words. They carried out her requests; they lived out her message. Pray the Rosary – they began immediately. Return on the 13th of each month for five more months – they withstood the persecution made upon them. Make sacrifices for poor sinners – they accepted and sought penances and sufferings that the mere mention would make most of us grimace. It was in these penances that the Fatima children were fulfilling our Lady’s request, fulfilling the Gospel message and showing us the importance of accepting the penances and sufferings of our everyday life, even to seek out additional penances beyond what are sent to us.

Before we examine the repeated requests to do penance made to the three children by our Lady of Fatima, we need to study the initial request made to the children. As you know the Angel of Peace was the first to visit the children. He appeared to them three times in the year 1916. For our purposes, we will focus on his last two visits which occurred in the summer and fall. On his second visit, he reminded the children to pray and he insisted, “Offer your prayers and sacrifices constantly to the Most High.” Lucia responded, “How are we to make sacrifices?” The angel continued, “Make of everything you can a sacrifice, and offer it to God as an act of reparation for the sins by which He is offended, and in supplication for the conversion of

sinner...Above all, accept and bear with submission, the suffering which the Lord will send you” (Fatima, 64). At his third and final visit, he called them to make reparation for ungrateful men. He said “Make reparation for their crimes and console your God” (Fatima, 65). All was now ready for the visit of the beautiful Lady from Heaven.

On May 13th, they received their first visit from the Queen of Heaven. Lucia’s memoirs contain the beautiful exchange between the children and our Lady (although, of the children, it was Lucia who did the talking and Francisco could only see the vision; Jacinta could both see and hear our Lady). After all the preliminaries were finished: from where did you come? Will we get to go to Heaven? And so on. Mary made her first request for penance. I read from Lucia’s memoirs: “Are you willing to offer yourselves to God to bear all the sufferings He wills to send you, as an act of reparation for the sins by which He is offended, and of supplication for the conversion of sinners?” ‘Yes, we are willing,’ was our reply. ‘Then, you are going to have much to suffer, but the grace of God will be your comfort’” (67).

In June, Mary said in regard to all that Lucia was suffering, “Don’t lose heart. I will never forsake you. My Immaculate Heart will be your refuge and the way that will lead you to God” (Fatima, 69). The next reminder to offer sacrifices for sinners came in July. Knowing that the children saw the horrors of hell, it makes sense that Our Lady would connect again the importance of a life of penance. In addition to the reminder, Our Lady gave them an aspiration to say in making the sacrifices. Our Lady said, “Sacrifice yourself for sinners, and say many times to Jesus, especially when you make some sacrifice: O Jesus, it is for love of You, for the conversion of sinners, and in reparation form the sins committed against the Immaculate Heart of Mary” (Fatima, 72). Imagine what our world would be like if more people would say this

instead of the other words that come to one's mind when one suffers an insult, an inconvenience or disagreement.

Mary did indeed give the children the tools necessary to avoid trouble, "If my requests are heeded, Russia will be converted, and there will be peace" (Fatima, 109). Unfortunately, what was to be avoided by taking on penance has come to pass: Russia has spread her errors, wars and persecutions have ensued. The good have faced martyrdom and the Holy Father has had much to suffer. In spite of sin, God always has the last word. Mary stated, "But in the end, my Immaculate Heart will triumph!"

In August, the children faced a major obstacle: they were held in the local jail, unable to make it to the site of the apparition. A few days later, Lucia saw Mary who asked again for the children to do penance. Lucia recalls, "Once again, the most Blessed Virgin recommended to us the practice of mortification, and ended by saying, 'Pray, pray, very much, and make sacrifices for sinners; for many souls go to hell, because there are none to sacrifice themselves and to pray for them'" (Fatima, 77). The children had been doing penance and were continually looking for more.

When the September apparition finally arrived, Mary encouraged them to continue on their way of fervor but does make one adjustment in their youthful enthusiasm. She remarked, "God is pleased with your sacrifices, but He does not want you to sleep with the rope on; only wear it during the day" (Fatima, 79). Assured that the children had truly heeded her request for penance, in October – the final visit, she only reminded them to tell people to amend their lives if they want their prayers answered.

In examining the apparitions of Our Lady of Fatima, we see that nothing is said that is not part of the Gospel message. One of the elements of approved private revelations is that they do

not teach any new doctrine but support what has already been accepted in the deposit of faith; the focus is applying the Gospel to a particular time and people an aspect of the faith. Now we are going to look at how the element of penance is part of the Gospel. At the very beginning of Christ's life, the Holy Family lived in simplicity and poverty. Jesus' precursor, St. John the Baptist, urged repentance and embraced a life of penance. St. Mark's Gospel recounts, "John was clothed in camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist. He fed on locusts and wild honey" (Mark 1:6). Jesus returns to this theme time and time again during His public ministry. In His Sermon on the Mount, he states, "When you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites" (6:16). This instruction is telling for Jesus does not say "if you fast" but rather "when you fast".

Then, as if we might feel that our Lord does not know what efforts it takes for us, fallen humanity, He counsels, "Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road broad that leads to destruction, and those who enter through it are many. How narrow the gate and constricted the road that leads to life. And those who find it are few" (Matthew 7:13). Our Lord knows that it will not be an easy task for us but He has marked out a path for us.

Later in His public ministry, He states, "whoever does not take up his cross and follow after me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (Matthew 10:38-39). Luke's Gospel contains an addition to this passage, "What profit is there for one to gain the whole world yet lose or forfeit himself?" (9:25). All of these sacrifices are not for the sake of sacrifice alone but for the purpose of purifying our hearts, making reparation for our sins as well as other's sins or to help another in his or her need.

In another section of the Gospel, Jesus prepares his Church for a penitential life. Some had questioned Him in regard to the lack of fasting the Apostles did during their time with our Lord. He responds not that the Church will be exempt from penance but, rather penance will come

when He is no longer on earth. “The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast” (Matthew 9:15). It is very tempting to make his life a utopia and forget all of the beauty and joy that awaits us in Heaven. To think of all the people we can assist to Heaven by making a few sacrifices on this earth!

Another episode in Jesus’ life bears relating. I read from Luke’s Gospel: “At that time some people who were present there told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with the blood of their sacrifices. He said to them in reply, ‘Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were greater sinners than all other Galileans? By no means! But I tell you, if you do not repent, you will all perish as they did!’” (13:1-3). Our Lord clearly relates that suffering is not necessarily because one is a great sinner; we all are sinners. We all need to live a life of penance; there is no way of escaping the need for daily sacrifices.

We cannot forget the life of Jesus Himself: He did not have a place to lay His head. Often, He would go away by Himself to pray. He spent the forty days before His public ministry fasting in the desert. Jesus did this for us, to give us His example; He obviously did not need to do these things for Himself.

The early Church understood this message as well. St. Paul, in his letter to the Colossians wrote, “Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ on behalf of his body, which is the church” (1:24). Paul endured many sufferings in spreading the Gospel; in his supernatural vision, he could see how these sufferings were part of the Christian life and ultimately leads to eternal life.

The children were eager to embrace what the Lady asked of them. They wanted to do all that she requested: in the beginning, they had to be prompted and later they had to be tempered, as we

have already seen. I would like to look at their penances under three different categories that will, in turn, help us to apply Our Lady's message and the children's example to our own lives.

First, we see the great love that motivated their sacrifices. They immediately set off to make sacrifices. Francisco was the one who thought about giving their lunch to the sheep. They soon realized that the poor children in the area would benefit more from the food than would their animals. Lucia recounts, "We agreed that whenever we met any poor children..., we would give them our lunch. They were only too happy to receive such an alms, and they took good care to meet us; they used to wait for us along the road" (Fatima, p.30-31). The three children then would try to fill their own stomachs with food they found in the field: acorns, olives, roots or berries. Jacinta would always choose that which was most bitter. When Lucia told her not to eat the bitter ones, Jacinta replied, "But it's because it's bitter that I am eating it, for the conversion of sinners" (30).

Their love was shown in the following story as well; this is the penance our Lady referred to in September visit. Lucia recounts, "As we were walking along the road with our sheep, I found a piece of rope that had fallen off a cart. I picked it up and just for fun, I tied it around my arm. Before long, I noticed that the rope was hurting me. 'Look, this hurts!' I said to my cousins. 'We could tie it around our waists and offer this sacrifice to God'" (Fatima, 77). Lucia was excited about finding another penance like most children are when they find a new video game. Yet these sufferings were intense for the children but they would not be hindered. Lucia continues, "Now and then, Jacinta could not keep back her tears, so great was the discomfort this caused her. Whenever I urged her to remove it, she replied: 'No! I want to offer this sacrifice to our Lord in reparation, and for the conversion of sinners'" (77). They endured these sufferings as

well as the sufferings involved with people either not believing their story or wanting to talk incessantly with them.

Secondly, we see that nothing was too great or too small to offer to God. They would not drink water during the hot Portuguese summer. Obviously this caused great suffering, especially for a little girl of seven. Jacinta asked Lucia one time when she was suffering from their penances, “‘Tell the crickets and the frogs to keep quiet! I have such a terrible headache.’ Then Francisco asked her: ‘Don’t you want to suffer this for sinners?’ The poor child, clasping her head between her two little hands, replied: ‘Yes, I do. Let them sing!’” (Fatima, 32).

Jacinta loved to dance but she made that sacrifice for sinners. Before one of the visits of Our Lady, they stopped playing for the afternoon and offered that as a sacrifice to God. Little did they know that a woman who had formerly insulted the young children, saw Jacinta make her appeal to heaven and this woman was converted. Lucia writes, “‘She told my mother, afterwards, that what Jacinta did, made such an impression on her, that she needed no other proof to make her believe in the reality of the apparitions; henceforth, she would not only not insult us any more, but would constantly ask us to pray to Our Lady, that her sins might be forgiven’” (Fatima, 39). I do not have time to go into all of the sacrifices the children offered, especially during their illnesses, but they do bespeak their great love and devotion as well as a beautiful understanding of the Fatima message.

Finally, they relied on God’s grace, not on their own. Many of the things they offered were difficult for them and they had to overcome their natural feelings. Yet they realized the great value of their sufferings. While in Prison at Ourem, Jacinta especially suffered due to being separated from her parents. She was urged by Francisco to offer it for sinners; Jacinta was sure to add her own special intentions as well: for the Holy Father, and in reparation for the sins

committed against the Immaculate Heart of Mary. Every time she would think about dying in prison without seeing her mother, she would begin crying. Lucia relates, “Don’t you want, then, to offer this sacrifice for the conversion of sinners?’ ‘I do want to, I do!’ With her face bathed in tears, she joined her hands, raised her eyes to heaven and made her offering: ‘O my Jesus! This is for love of You, for the conversion of sinners, for the Holy Father, and in reparation for the sins committed against the Immaculate Heart of Mary!’” (Fatima, 35). The children truly responded to Mary’s call to penance; they did it in such a childlike and simple way.

I have just related to you the sacrifices made by the children during and shortly after the apparitions. Now I would like to leave with you some of the advice that Sr. Lucia gave in her book that has been quoted already, “Calls” from the Message of Fatima. She gives five specific areas of focus. As I was reading these suggestions, I could not help but notice that the same love and fervor are there but also a maturity and prudence.

She writes, “It is generosity in ordinary little things that are constantly happening; it is making perfect the present moment” (106). She also urges her readers to take advantage of every opportunity that presents itself, never to waste an occasion to make a sacrifice to God. As you will see, these can be so little and hidden; we do not have to make great efforts but we do need to make efforts, otherwise, we will be failing to live out this Gospel command.

Lucia’s first suggestion: “To make our prayer with faith and attention, avoiding distractions as far as possible; praying respectfully, remembering that we are speaking to God; praying with confidence and love...” (106). These seem to be so little and yet if we attempt to put them into practice we realize the great effort it takes.

Two: “To offer to God the sacrifice of some little act of self-denial in the matter of *food*, but not to the extent of impairing the physical strength we need in order to do our work. Thus for

example, to choose a fruit, a dessert, a drink that we don't particularly like rather than one that we do; to endure thirst for a while and then slake it, but with a drink that we don't particularly like...When we are serving ourselves at table, not to take the best bit. But if we cannot avoid doing so without drawing attention to ourselves, to take it with simplicity and without scruple, thanking God for spoiling us, because we must not think that God, good Father that He is, is only pleased with us when He sees us practicing self-denial. God created good things for his children, and likes to see us making use of them, without abusing them, and then fulfilling our duty of working to deserve them, and making use of them with gratitude and love for the One who heaps his gifts upon us" (107).

Her third point is on the sacrifices that one can make in the area of clothing: remembering simplicity, modesty, dignity. She encourages: "putting up with a little cold or heat without complaining" (107). Our society is so caught up on image. As a Christian trying to live out the Gospel, this encouragement can help one to remember that one's faith comes before fashion.

Fourth: "To endure uncomplainingly whatever little annoyances we may encounter on our path: sometimes, it may be a disagreeable, irritating or unpleasant word; at others, it may be an ironic smile, a look of disdain, a contradiction; or we are passed over or set aside as of no account; yet again, it may be a misunderstanding, a reproof, a rejection...Thus, it is necessary to know how to endure all things, offering our sacrifice to God and letting things drop: to let all these things pass as if we were blind, deaf and dumb, so that we may in fact see better, speak with greater certainty and hear the voice of God. Let others seem have their way; I say 'seem' because in reality the one who prevails is the one who know how to keep silent for the love of the Lord" (108). Sr. Lucia continues on with some other practical and profound points; she has a wonderful way of bringing the message of penance down to an everyday level.

Finally, she writes, “Then there are *exterior penances and sacrifices*, some obligatory, the others voluntary” (108). Lucia goes on to mention the fasts and abstinence imposed on us by the Church, the obligatory, and then the voluntary, like praying with one’s arms outstretched in the form of a cross. These penances are good to do for the conversion of sinners but also for ourselves, that we will be truly converted in our hearts. We may even need to take on a penance that will help us overcome our sinful tendencies.

So in the midst of our everyday lives when we are trying to live out the Gospel message of penance that has been repeated for us at Fatima, we have the beautiful and simple example of the three shepherd children to guide us. May they be a source of inspiration and a pathway to the Immaculate Heart of Mary!

Works Cited

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