

“Penance! Penance! Penance!”: The Message of Our Lady of Lourdes

Tenth Annual Novena to the Immaculate Heart of Mary

*The Fruit of Her Pondering: the Words of Our Lady*

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Wednesday, June 17, 2009

We have all heard it said that actions speak louder than words. And we know this to be true. A person who always acts in truth and in love readily has an audience whenever he or she speaks, even though the words are few. In such a person each word is carefully spoken. No word is wasted. Thus when Our Lady speaks we listen.

Today’s talk is on the message Our Lady of Lourdes gave to Bernadette. It is a simple, yet profound message she repeated to Bernadette several times: Penance! Penance! Penance!

What comes to mind when we hear this word? Is it not true that when we hear this our minds register concepts such as trials, suffering, sacrifice, unpleasant, hardships, denying self, carrying the cross, etc. and whether we want to admit it or not, our nature recoils at all this? Yet can we deny that these very things when seen from the right angle really turn us away from ourselves and direct us toward God?

In this talk, I want to address three aspects of penance: what is penance, why penance, and how to do penance. My hope is that you will not only grow in your understanding of penance but more importantly in your appreciation of needing to live a life of penance.

I want to begin by reading Bernadette’s account of the 3<sup>rd</sup> apparition which was the first time Mary spoke with her.

“When I arrived at the Grotto, I again began with a few *Ave Marias*. I saw the same vision. I was with some adults who had advised me to take paper and ink and say to her: “If you have something to say to me, would you be kind enough to write it down?” I said those very words to the Lady. She began to smile, and told me that it was not necessary to write down what she had to tell me. She asked me if I would have the grace to return to the Grotto for fifteen days and I said yes. She asked me to go tell the priests that they should have a chapel built there. She also asked me to go drink from the spring and wash there; since I did not see a spring, I started toward the Gave. She said that that was not the right place and she pointed to another place, showing me the spring under the Grotto. I went to the place she showed me, but all I saw was a

tiny bit of muddy water. There was so little of it that I was hardly able to get any of it in my hands. Nevertheless, I obeyed and started digging with my hands. I tried to drink it, but it was so dirty that the first three times it came back up. On the fourth try, I was able to drink a little of it. She asked me, for the sake of sinners, would I mind eating some grass that was in the same place where I drank. She asked that only once; I do not know why. She said, “Would you be willing to kiss the ground for the sake of sinners? Would you be willing to crawl on your knees, for the sake of sinners? Penance! Penance! Penance!” She asked me to pray for the conversion of sinners. This merciful Queen looked sad when she told me to pray for sinners. She repeated these same words to me several times. ...” ( A Holy Life: The Writings of Saint Bernadette of Lourdes, Patricia McEachern, pp. 23-24)

Penance is nothing new or novel. It did not originate with the appearances of Mary. No, it is much earlier than that. In fact, it goes back further than the time of Christ to the beginning with Adam and Eve after their Fall from grace.

### **Penance: what it is**

So what is this penance of which we speak? Is it negative or is it something positive? How is it necessary in our growth in holiness?

The Catechism of the Catholic Church defines the call to penance as being intimately linked to conversion not aiming first at outward work “ ‘sackcloth and ashes’, fasting and mortification, but at the conversion of the heart, interior conversion.” At the same time the Catechism makes clear how interior conversion needs to be expressed in “visible signs, gestures and works of penance.” Cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1430

This connection between penance and conversion is also addressed in Dom Hubert Van Zeller’s book Approach to Penance. He writes:

“The only kind of penitence which is worth anything is conversion. Not only conversion *from* but conversion *to*. The penitence which stops short at remorse is not a true conversion, not a complete turn. For conversion to be effective it must be supernatural; it must go on to trust. To turn your back upon sin is one thing, and is a good start, but it will not help you for long unless you turn your eyes towards grace.” (Van Zeller, p.1)

Penance, in Latin *paenitentia*, refers to repentance. When we are repentant we manifest sorrow or contrition for sin in both our disposition and in our actions. The acts that we do, self-denial, mortification, sacrifice, etc., are intended to show sorrow or repentance for sin.

We are probably all familiar with practicing some kinds of penance such as forms of fasting, prayer, and almsgiving during Lent and denying ourselves particular things during days of penance every Friday. Although these are good and necessary, this is not the heart of true penance.

Penance rightly understood involves the whole self, not just parts of me which I decide I can or want to relinquish to God. Thus if I want to benefit from penance I must work on surrendering myself to God, whole and entire, from moment to moment and hour to hour. I must open myself to the way of love so that my penance may flow from charity. Rather than steeling the will and making it hard to bend, I should wait on the Holy Spirit who breathes where and when and how He wills. That is not to say that my mind and will need not be trained by means of certain methods and discipline, they do play their part. What waiting on the Holy Spirit means is that I must rely on God's grace and if He desires different things at different times my soul must be docile allowing itself to be taught and flexible ready to abandon my imposed penances for those of God.

Where we so often make mistakes in our penance is when we take the control. We want to be the pilot of our own plane or the captain of our own ship so we draw up our list of practices, devotions, and resolutions that we want to accomplish and bind ourselves to them. "I am going to do this if it kills me." Does this sound familiar? We tell God what sacrifices He would like and giving them to Him we congratulate ourselves only to be surprised when we find out that He has been asking us for different ones all along. Had we been listening to what He wants, we could have avoided the frustrations that so often result when God sends a suffering that we had not planned. We must reverse our disposition from "Not Thy will but mine be done" to that of Christ to His Father: "Not my will but Thine be done."

**Penance: why it is necessary**

Why do we need penance? Is it really essential for us to get to heaven?

The fundamental reason man needs penance is to constantly make real or better yet to allow God to make real the quality of our repentance, our conversion, our break with sin. As a result of the Fall we are deeply wounded by its effects. Even the Sacrament of Baptism does not

remove concupiscence from us. Man finds in himself the tendency to sin and weaknesses to overcome. There is a disordering within the very person of man. Soul and body war against each other. The only way to overcome this is by human effort coupled with God's grace. To make ourselves right with God, to be reordered to God, we need penance. Penance aims to bring order into every faculty of man's soul and body so that what is bent may be made straight and what is good may be pruned to bear better fruit. With the help of penance, our entire being can be ordered to God. In other words, our whole person can be made to desire God and Him alone.

Both Testaments in Holy Scripture bear this out. We find in the Old Testament the Ten Commandments, such as the 9<sup>th</sup>: "You shall not covet your neighbor's wife" and the 10<sup>th</sup>: "You shall not covet your neighbor's goods" address this. Not only are we not to have them for ourselves, we are not even to desire them. In other words, our desire must be for God and His will and penance helps us achieve this.

Then in the New Testament Our Lord speaking of discipleship in Luke 9: 23-25: "If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it. What profit is there for one to gain the whole world yet lose or forfeit himself?"

On closer examination of this passage, some things practically jump off the page. Isn't it interesting that the condition for following Christ even before taking up the cross is denial of self?

What does the word "deny" mean in this context? One of our priests explains this by turning to the passage of St. Peter's denial of Jesus. Peter is warming himself by the fire after Jesus' arrest. Someone recognizes Peter as having been with Jesus and questions Peter about it. Peter, who has already twice denied Jesus, says: "I do not know the man!"

The Scriptural understanding of the word "know" does not merely indicate knowledge about someone but an intimate relationship with another. In the book of Genesis: Adam knew Eve and she conceived Cain. Thus when Peter profusely states "I do not know the man" he is denying the true close friendship that he shares with Our Lord.

So when we deny ourselves are we not admitting that we do not know ourselves as we ought, that we are not in control, and that we recognize our need to surrender to Our Lord because He knows us better than we know ourselves? After all, let's not forget. He created us didn't He?

Yet there is another reason why we need penance. We are not alone. Every person, every soul in this world, experiences some form of suffering. Some more, some less but no one is exempt. This is the result of man's fallen condition.

If every person is to be united to the Triune God (and we are all in this together, i.e. we are members or potential members of the one Body of Christ), then my penance can help others and the penance of others can help me. The phrase "Offer it up" comes to mind here. St. Paul in the letter to the Colossians 1: 24 states: "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." When we live out penance in our lives we are united to Christ in His suffering and in this way we cooperate in His redemption for the salvation of souls, our own and those of the whole world. With St. Faustina we pray: "For the sake of His sorrowful passion, have mercy on us and on the whole world."

With all this said, it must be noted that unless we apply penance to our everyday lives, it will be of little use to us.

**Penance: How we live it**

How then do we live penance?

To explain this we can look at nature. Take a tree as an example. When a tree branch dies, if it does not fall from the tree, then it must be cut off. Why? So that those branches still able to bear fruit have the sap of life they need. Even fruit producing branches need to be pruned back so that they can bring forth more abundant fruit. So it is with us.

Penance makes it possible to rid ourselves of our "dead branches" and to purge the "good branches" so our fruit, growing in union with God and each other and thus becoming holy, is made real in our lives. When we surrender all our mind, heart, body and soul to the discipline of penance both what God imposes and what we impose on ourselves, then we will become rightly ordered to the Triune God.

So how do we do this? We look at the major faculties of body and soul and apply certain practices. Whether the faculty is external or internal will decide the kind of penance. For the external ones, we can impose penances called active penance because we do the acting. For the internal ones where purification needs to be administered, we do better allowing God to work on

us and thus they are known as passive. But whatever the penances, we must always be ready and willing to surrender to the Holy Spirit.

To give us a concrete application, I am going to use one of the bodily senses. St. Thomas Aquinas teaches that everything comes to us by means of our senses. Let's take the example of our sight. So much of what we take in comes through our eyes.

You can ask yourself questions such as: At what or whom am I looking? Is it necessary for my eternal salvation? Do I find this brings me closer to God or pushes me further away? If I find that ultimately this particular image or these images really do not benefit me even though I may want to see this video or that movie or this DVD, then here I have an opportunity to practice penance. It may mean that I will abstain from certain kinds of media. It may mean that whenever certain images are present, I will say "no" and turn away. The opportunities, methods, and practices are endless.

We can do this for all our senses. This is what we call mortification of the senses. Mortification in Latin is *mortificatio* meaning a killing so that we subject our senses to certain penances, depending upon what we are trying to get rid of in ourselves, so that we are the master over our senses rather than our senses mastering us.

Everything, as I have already stated, comes into the interior of man by means of the five senses. What I see, hear, etc. produces thoughts in my intellect. From these thoughts arise desires and I then act according to my desires. Our desires are what drive us to action. Thus we must work hard so that every part of our body, soul and spirit desires union with God.

And what if we are advanced in pursuing holiness? Is there anything we can do? Oh yes! There are still defects that must be purified: speaking too much; excessively desiring esteem; eating too avidly; seeking pleasure for the senses: in types of food and drink, in convenience and comfort like heat and cold (Did you know... comfort, convenience, and ease are not Gospel words!); having little patience with oneself and with others; indulging petty attachments to all sorts of little things and ways of doing things; procrastinating; exaggerating; gossiping; omitting good acts: a smile, a word of praise, a helping gesture, expression of an unpopular point of view; indulging vanities; etc.

We do not have to go far to find opportunities for penance. We can find them in every state of life, doing our daily duty.

Let us remember, God does His share but we must do ours so that working together- God with His grace and man with his effort- we become the saints He calls us to be. St. Augustine teaches that God created us without our help but He will not recreate us without our help.

With St. Paul, then, let us be impelled by the Love of Christ.

In closing, I leave you with these thoughts from St. Bernadette Soubirous, whose life was an eloquent testimony to living a life of penance, not so much in words as in action.

“Jesus must reign

1. in my heart
2. in my spirit
3. in my will; in other words, in my entire soul.”

“No longer my will, my good Mother, but yours, which is always the will of Jesus!”

(Quotes from A Holy Life: The Writings of Saint Bernadette of Lourdes by Patricia McEachern, Ph. D., pp. 56 & 57)

**Together, united in the Immaculate Heart of Mary, let us say not so much in our words as in our actions: Fiat! Be it done to me.**