



# Pilgrimage:

A Newsletter of Christian Spirituality

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## PENITENCE

Most of the time, we try to maintain the illusion that we are good and worthy people. We may admit that we make mistakes sometimes, but we like to think of ourselves as basically good. In fact, we are afraid to think of ourselves in any other way. If we are not basically good, then what is there within us to love -- either for us to love in ourselves or for anyone else to love? This is clearly a very dangerous situation. If we are not good, we may not be able to live with ourselves; we may find ourselves hateful and odious to ourselves, not to say to other people as well.

It is not particularly surprising, then, that we try to erect and maintain the illusion of goodness. The effort that we put into it shows in various ways. For one, when we do sin (and it happens), we are quick to excuse the sin. We think of all the reasons that we are not really responsible for it, all the extenuating circumstances. We figure out all the excuses why it is not really a sin, or at least, not a very serious one. We look at the one side of it, and deny the evil side. We refuse to see the worst of the evil in it, and deny our own responsibility in the matter.

Similarly, we find fault with other people. This is the other side of excusing our own sins. We find fault with them in order to show how good we are by comparison. Then we can justify ourselves: that we are not like them. We are judgemental of others, and we tend to see their sins (or possible sins) in the worst possible light. We look at them in just the opposite way that we look at our own. Looking at others' sins, we make no allowance for circumstances, no consideration for human weakness. We judge others accordingly. While we always look at the brightest aspect of our own sin, with others we look at the worst. Then ours don't look nearly so bad by comparison, and we can believe that we really are good people, and not like the rest of mankind.

If, for example, we notice someone who forgets to genuflect when he comes into Church, we think how ignorant or irreligious he must be -- or at least how negligent. We can think of lots of reasons for his action, all of them bad. He is ignorant of appropriate behaviour in Church. He doesn't recognize that our Lord is really present in the Reserved Sacrament. He is too distracted with worldly things to remember the genuflection. And so on. We look down on him for his mistake. But if, perchance, we one day slip into our pew without the accustomed genuflection, then we are quick to excuse ourselves. We were thinking about something else. It isn't really that big a deal. God knows that we meant to -- we do it all the time anyway. We may even look around furtively to see if anyone noticed, thinking more or less consciously that if no one noticed, then we can pretend it never happened.

We also make it a habit to parade our own good deeds before our eyes. This way, we keep the evidence of our goodness constantly at hand. We can cite all these examples of our generosity, our kindness, our forbearance, and the difficult circumstances in which we accomplished these good deeds, to prove to ourselves that we must be good.

In all of it, we deny that there is a fundamental problem. What problems there are are temporary aberrations, mere accidental mistakes, which certainly do not touch the roots of my being. So far as we recognize a problem at all, we recognize only a superficial problem. It is a problem requiring only a little fine tuning in our behaviour, but nothing really serious. Through it all, we steadfastly refuse to consider the possibility that there might be an essential problem with who we are, and not just with a few of the little things that we do sometimes. We refuse to acknowledge our essential sinfulness. We are convinced of our basic righteousness. It is a righteousness which we have earned for ourselves by our good deeds. Because we have earned it, we must defend it. And in particular, we must defend it from the threats of the truth that we are not righteous.

It is in this condition that we all begin Christian life. We do not think that we really need redemption; after all, we have our own righteousness. For most of us, the temptation to think ourselves good abides long after we have begun to live as Christians. It is the major obstacle to accepting God's grace to amend our lives, for it amounts to refusing that we need it.

This is why penitence is essential to Christian life. It is penitence that gives us a true picture of ourselves, and puts us in the position to accept both our needs, and God's gifts to satisfy those needs.

Penitence is sometimes identified with doing penitential acts: listening to long sermons, fasting, going to the dentist, foregoing

bodily pleasures. But this is but a small part of it. Penitence is also thought of as something purely negative: breast-beating, groveling, or pretending that we are completely evil and worthless creatures. That, of course, is as much an illusion as our worthiness. We never have more than limited success at thinking of ourselves as purely evil, anyway, since we know it is not true. For we are made by God in His image -- and that (with our redemption by His act) gives us worth. Penitence is no more a matter of thinking that we are worse than we are, than it is thinking we are already good. In both errors, we try to think of ourselves apart from what God has done for us. Apart from God, we will never truly understand who we are. Penitence is the means by which we recover that true Christian attitude in our lives.

Penitence is therefore a way of looking at one's self: of seeking the truth of how we stand before God. It means that we will be willing to look at our sins for what they are -- and this is the unpleasant part of penitence. We see them first of all for what they do to us: they make us into rather unlovable creatures. They always hurt us, and keep us from being the people we are meant to be. Then we must accept the hurt which they do to other people. We must face them as they are, not excusing ourselves from our just responsibility or pretending that they don't really hurt other people. We must face what they do to us and to others. But we must not stop there. We must go on to look at what our sins do to God. For they wound His love for us. He is trying to surround us with His love and support us with it, and we fight against it. Our sins are arrows shot into that love, hurting the love, but still being absorbed and overcome by the love. Our sins drive the nails into the hands and feet of our Saviour.

Penitence leads us to admit that we are sinners. We accept that our sin is real and part of us, and not just an occasional accident that doesn't really matter much. We accept that left to ourselves, we stand condemned before God, for nothing that is not holy can abide the presence of God. We admit that our image of ourselves as righteous is an illusion and false. We see that our self-righteousness is not really righteousness at all. We see that we need a righteousness that only God can give us.

We cannot even recognize our utter need for redemption without the aid of God's grace. The realization that we can never achieve righteousness on our own will lead us to despair without the alternative which God stands ready to give us. We can hardly live for long under an unremitting sentence of condemnation. The alternative which He offers us is to accept our worth from Him as His gift. He will give us our identity: in His image, no less. He gives it to us, but not because we are good enough to earn it. We receive it from the generosity of His love. He wants to redeem us. He wants us to accept His love and redemption, and so be worthy. We accept it by recognizing that we cannot do it on our own, and that we are sinners

in need of redemption. Perhaps the hardest thing about being a Christian is admitting that God redeems us out of His free grace, without regard for all that we have done (and tried to do) to be good. But without admitting it, we can never open ourselves to receive His gift. Denying that we need it, we will refuse to accept it.

In penitence, we find ourselves lovable where we were not before. But now it is not an illusion that we construct for ourselves. Now it is a loveliness planted within us by God. It is attested by the love which we receive from Him. We know we must be lovable if He loves us. Then we must learn to love ourselves in the same way: created in His image, fallen and at the same time forgiven and redeemed. We will be able to receive our own love because we receive His. As we find ourselves righteous in Him rather than in ourselves, so we will find ourselves lovable in Him.

This turns out to be wonderfully liberating. It releases all the energy we were devoting to illusion maintenance: to putting the best light on our sins, to judging most harshly the sins of others, to keeping our good deeds always in mind. Now that energy can be used for something productive. We no longer need worry about our righteousness: that is now God's concern. He gives us what we need, and if it comes from Him, we can trust it and need not worry about it. His righteousness (which He shares with us) is quite secure.

In addition, we can now love ourselves truly. For we can love ourselves as we really are, and not as we would like to imagine ourselves. We can acknowledge our sins, and love the redeemed child of God which is there as well. We can forgive ourselves as He forgives us -- self-forgiveness was never possible when we were maintaining the illusion of goodness. We can share God's love, an honest and powerful love for reality. We find that our worth no longer depends upon our efforts. So now we are free of that burden and can enjoy the result.

Penitence is thus a joyful approach to life. For it is dedicated to the truth about man before God. The truth is sometimes painful (as the truth of sin is both for Jesus and for us), but there is no easier way to live than in the truth. The fruit of a life of penitence is the freedom to forgive one's self, and to accept the great gift of forgiveness from God. The fruit is a joyous life free from the tyranny of sin. "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us; but if we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." (1 John 1:8-9)

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