



## Father John A. Hardon, S.J. Archives

### Lent

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## Penance and Reparation: A Lenten Meditation

*by Fr. John A. Hardon, S.J.*

Penance and reparation are the consequence of sin. Or again, penance and reparation are the price we have to pay for our own and other people's sin. Penance and reparation, finally, are what God requires from sinners as a condition for showing them His mercy.

In order to better understand the meaning of penance and reparation, we have to look for a moment at what happens whenever we sin. Two things happen:

- First: we incur guilt before God for the self-will that caused us to sin. We become more or less separated or estranged from God, depending on the gravity of our sin.
- Second: We deserve punishment for the disorder we cause by our sinful conduct. We become liable to suffering pain, again more or less pain, depending on how seriously we have done wrong.

Against this background, we can more easily see the meaning of penance and reparation.

- Penance is the repentance we must make to remove the guilt, or to reinstate ourselves in God's friendship.
- Reparation is the pain we must endure to make up for the harm we brought about by our self-indulgence when we sinned.

What then do penance and reparation have in common? They have this in common, that they are absolutely necessary if the justice of God is to be satisfied after we have offended the divine Majesty. They also have this in common, that God now has a right to demand more of us than He would have required had we not committed sin. The word **more** is basic to any correct understanding of penance and reparation.

But if penance and reparation have this in common, how do they differ? They differ, as we have seen, in the two different ways that we do wrong whenever we sin. Because we have failed in loving God, we now owe Him more love than He would have required had we not offended Him.

We did wrong by our willful love of self. So now we have to make up by our selfless love of God. This is Penance.

And because we have brought disorder into the world by our sins, we must undergo pain to undo this harm we have caused. This is reparation.

# Why Penance and Reparation?

If we ask, why penance and reparation, the first answer is: Because God wants it.

But if we press the question: Why does God want it? Then we must say, because in His mysterious wisdom, His justice requires it. We may legitimately say, without really understanding it, that He has no choice. Having given us a free will, if we abuse liberty, we must use our freedom to repay to God the love we have stolen from Him (which is penance) and repair the damage we have done (which is reparation).

Notice, all along I have been using the first person plural, "we", because penance and reparation are owed to God not only because I have individually sinned, but because we human beings have sinned and are sinning, in our day, on a scale never before conceived in the annals of history.

We know better than Cain after he killed his brother, Abel. We **are** our brother's keepers. We are mysteriously co-responsible for what other people do wrong. There is a profound sense in which all of us are somehow to do penance and make reparation, not only for our sinful misdeeds, but for the sins of our country and, indeed, for the sins of the whole human race.

We return to our question: **Why** penance and reparation? Because, in Christ's words, "Unless you do penance, you shall **all** likewise perish".

Is it any wonder that on Pentecost Sunday, after Peter preached his sermon, and rebuked the people for their sins, and they asked him, "what must we do," his first word to the multitude was the imperative verb, "Repent!"

Is it any wonder that Our Lady of Fatima's message to a sinful world in our day, may be summarized in the same imperative, "Do penance."

Indeed, the calamities that we have so far seen in this present century: two world wars with more casualties than in all the previous wars of history, and the threat of a nuclear holocaust that hangs over us like a tornado cloud. All of this is God's warning to do penance and reparation. Why? Because God is not mocked.

You do not offend God with impunity. You do not sin without retribution. You do not ignore the will of the Almighty and expect the Almighty to ignore what you do.

What bears emphasis, however, is that this retribution is either to be paid willingly, with our penance and reparation, or will be paid unwillingly within the divine punishment.

The divine logic is simple, awfully simple, and all we have to do is learn what God is telling us. Either we do penance and reparation because we want to, or we shall suffer (against our will) the consequences of our sins in this life, and in the life to come.

But remember, this penance and reparation is to be done not only for what we have personally done wrong. It is for all the pride and lust, for all the cruelty and greed, for all the envy and laziness and gluttony of a sin-laden human family.

God is merciful and in fact as our Holy Father has told us, Jesus Christ is the Incarnation of divine mercy. But God's mercy is conditional. It is conditional on our practice of penance and reparation.

# How to Practice Penance and Reparation

We come to the third and, in a way, most important part of our subject: How?

I say it is the most important because we could talk for hours about the theology of penance and reparation and end up, wiser perhaps, but not holier. We must take the next and final step, and ask ourselves, practically, what am to do about it?

In order to come to the point immediately, let me give you what I call seven rules, three for penance and four for reparation. They can be expressed in seven words, where each word is a divine command as follows:

1. Pray!
2. Share!
3. And forgive! - for penance, to make up for our failure in loving God.
4. Work!
5. Endure!
6. Deprive!
7. And sacrifice! - in reparation for the punishment that we and others have deserved for our sins.

Suppose we spend a moment on each of these seven rules, and ask Our Lord, to open our hearts to respond with generosity to His offended Sacred Heart.

## Rule #1 - Pray

God expects more of us because we have sinned. And the first more that all of us can put into practice, is more prayer.

- Call it giving more time each day to prayer.
- Call it attending Mass more often.
- Call it reciting the Rosary more frequently.
- Call it being more attentive when we pray.
- Call it more fervor in our life of prayer.
- Call it getting more people to join us when we pray.
- No matter, the first rule of salutary penance is more prayer.

## Rule #2 - Share

Remember what Christ told us the night before He died. "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another as I have loved you." If all sin is a failure in loving God, and we mainly show our love for God by loving one another, then we had better show our love for others by sharing with them what God has given to us.

Again the word **more** comes in. We are to examine our conscience and ask ourselves, what **more** can I share with those whom God has placed into my life?

- Can I give more of my time to others?
- Can I share more of my knowledge with others?
- Can I share more of my skill with others?
- Can I share more of my money with others?
- Can I share more of my Catholic faith with others?

Each of us is different in this matter of sharing because each of us is living a different life with different people whom God's Providence places in our path. The second rule for the practice of penance is more sharing.

## **Rule #3 - Forgive**

Christ could not have been more explicit in urging us to forgive others who offend us. He gave us whole parables on the subject of forgiveness. He warned us that God will be as merciful to us as we are forgiving to others. He placed, in the center of The Lord's Prayer, a frightening invocation, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."

Once again, it behooves us to look to our practice of forgiveness of injuries, so to be more forgiving in the future than we have been in the past.

- Can I be more forgiving by forgetting what others have done to me?
- Can I be more forgiving by ignoring the unkindness and thoughtlessness and perhaps meanness that others commit against me?

No two of us are living the same lives. Each of us have different people saying or doing or failing to say or do things that hurt us and, perhaps, crush the very heart of our souls. The third rule of penance is to be more forgiving.

## **Rule #4 - Work**

We now shift from penance to reparation, and our first directive is to work. How is work a form of reparation of sin? It is reparation because our fallen human nature dislikes to exert itself. Work is a form of mortification that all of us can look to see whether we could not work harder than we are doing - in performance of tasks that are part of our state in life.

By nature we are prone to first do what we like, then what is useful, and finally, what is necessary.

I cannot think of a more effective kind of reparation than to set our minds to reversing that order.

We should first do what is necessary, then what is useful, and only then what is pleasant or what we like.

## **Rule #5 - Endure**

In some ways this is the keystone of reparation, the patient endurance of the sufferings and trials that God sends us.

God in His mercy sends us the Cross in order to try our patience that we might save our souls and the souls of many others besides.

The variety of these trials sent us by God defies classification and their intensity depends on a thousand factors that differ with different people. If we are to expiate sin we must resign ourselves to endure pain. But, as we know, there are degrees and degrees to this resignation.

- Can we accept misunderstanding from others with greater peace of mind?
- Can we be more generous in doing what we know God wants us to do, although doing it is painful?
- Can we suffer without pitying ourselves?
- Can we put up with discomfort, or distaste, or disability, without becoming bitter about what we are tempted to consider injustice on the part of God?

Yes, God's violations are blessings, and the crosses He sends us are tokens of His love. But how we need the light of faith to see this, and the strength of His grace to do this -- in reparation for sin, as the price we must pay to reach heaven, where every tear will be wiped away and all the past, which is now the present, will have passed away.

## **Rule #6 - Deprive**

Our sixth rule is to practice reparation by depriving ourselves of something we now have that we could, if we wanted to, do without.

- It may be some luxury in the home,
- Or some delicacy at table,
- Or some comfort in our way of living,
- Or some trinket, or adult toy that we could just as well do without.

Call it mortification or self-denial; whatever the name, the basic idea is to expiate for sins of self-indulgence by giving up. When we sin we offend God by choosing some creature to which we have no right. When we practice mortification, we make reparation by choosing to deprive ourselves of some creature we have a right to -- why, in order to undo the harm caused by sin and thus propitiate the offended justice of God.

## **Rule #7 - Sacrifice**

I have saved sacrifice for the end because it synthesizes everything we have so far said.

- What is sacrifice? Sacrifice is the surrender of something to God.
- Sacrifice is the heart of penance and reparation.

When we sacrifice, we let go with our wills of whatever we could legitimately possess and enjoy because

we want to make up to God for having stupidly chosen some creature in preference to the Creator.

We return to where we began by stressing that when we sacrifice, we do **more** than we would have done; we give up more than we would have given up; we surrender more of what we like in order to -- in plain English -- prove to God that we love Him.

There is an episode in the Gospels that perfectly synthesizes this cardinal mystery of sin and penitential reparation.

Remember after the Resurrection when Christ asked Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than the others do?" Why the question? Because Peter had sinned; sinned more than the others who had remained faithful to the Master. Peter was expected to love Christ more. Why more? Because he had more to sacrifice in order to expiate more because he had so deeply sinned in denying the Saviour.

## Conclusion

As we look into our hearts we must humbly confess that truly, we have sinned, sinned often, sinned deeply, sinned willfully.

But God is good. He gives us the privilege of not only expiating what we have done wrong, but actually becoming more pleasing to Him by our penance and reparation.

It was no pious statement that St. Paul gave us when he said, "Where sin abounded, grace has even more abounded." In other words, in God's providence, He allows us to sin so we might repent and become saints.

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