



PAENITENTIAM AGERE

Encyclical of Pope John XXIII on July 1, 1962

To His Venerable Brethren the Patriarchs, Primates, Archbishops, Bishops, and other Local Ordinaries who are at Peace and Communion with the Apostolic See.

Venerable Brethren, Health and Apostolic Benediction.

Doing penance for one's sins is a first step towards obtaining forgiveness and winning eternal salvation. That is the clear and explicit teaching of Christ, and no one can fail to see how justified and how right the Catholic Church has always been in constantly insisting on this. She is the spokesman for her divine Redeemer. No individual Christian can grow in perfection, nor can Christianity gain in vigor, except it be on the basis of penance.

2. That is why in Our Apostolic Constitution officially proclaiming the Second Ecumenical Vatican Council and urging the faithful to make a worthy spiritual preparation for this great event by prayer and other acts of Christian virtue, We included a warning to them not to overlook the practice of voluntary mortification.[1]

3. And now, as the day for the opening of the Second Vatican Council draws nearer, We wish to repeat that request of Ours and dwell on it at greater length. In doing so We are confident that We are serving the best interests of this most important and solemn assembly. For while admitting that Christ is present to His Church "all days, even unto the consummation of the world,"[2] we must think of Him as being even closer to men's hearts and minds during the time of an Ecumenical Council, for He is present in the persons of His legates, of whom He said quite emphatically "He who hears you, hears me." [3]

4. The Ecumenical Council will be a meeting of the successors of the Apostles, men to whom the Savior of the human race gave the command to teach all nations and urge them to observe all His commandments.[4] Its manifest task, therefore, will be publicly to reaffirm God's rights over mankind, whom Christ's blood has redeemed, and to reaffirm the duties of redeemed mankind towards its God and Savior.

5. Now we have only to open the sacred books of the Old and New Testament to be assured of one thing: it was never God's will to reveal Himself in any solemn encounter with mortal men -- to speak in human terms -- without first calling them to prayer and penance. Indeed, Moses refused to give the Hebrews the tables of the Law until they had expiated their crime of idolatry and ingratitude.[5]

6. So too the Prophets; they never wearied of exhorting the Israelites to make their prayers acceptable to God, their supreme Overlord, by offering them in a penitential spirit. Otherwise they would bring about their own exclusion from the plan of divine Providence, according to which God Himself was to be the King of His chosen people.

7. The most deeply impressive of these prophetic utterances is surely that warning of Joel which is constantly ringing in our ears in the course of the Lenten liturgy: "Now therefore, says the Lord, Be converted to me with all your heart, in fasting and in weeping and in mourning. And rend your hearts and not your garments. . . Between the porch and the altar the priests, the Lord's ministers, shall weep and say: Spare, O Lord, spare thy people, and give not thy inheritance to reproach, that the heathen should rule over them."[6]

8. Nor did these calls to penance cease when the Son of God became incarnate. On the contrary, they became even more insistent. At the very outset of his preaching, John the Baptist proclaimed: "Do penance, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."[7] And Jesus inaugurated His saving mission in the same way. He did not begin by revealing the principal truths of the faith. First He insisted that the soul must repent of every trace of sin that could render it impervious to the message of eternal salvation: "From that time Jesus began to preach and to say, Do penance, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."[8]

9. He was even more vehement than were the Prophets in His demands that those who listened to Him should undergo a complete change of heart and submit in perfect sincerity to all the laws of the Supreme God. "For behold," He said "the kingdom of God is within you."[9]

10. Indeed, penance is that counterforce which keeps the forces of concupiscence in check and repels them. In the words of Christ Himself, "the kingdom of heaven has been enduring violent assault, and the violent have been seizing it by force."[10]

11. The Apostles held undeviatingly to the principles of their divine Master. When the Holy Spirit had descended on them in the form of fiery tongues, Peter expressed his invitation to the multitudes to seek rebirth in Christ and to accept the gifts of the most holy Paraclete in these words: "Do penance and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, for the remission of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."[11] Paul too, the teacher of the Gentiles, announced to the Romans in no uncertain terms that the kingdom of God did not consist in an attitude of intellectual superiority or in indulging the pleasures of sense. It consisted in the triumph of justice and in peace of mind. "For the kingdom of God does not consist in food and drink, but in justice and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit."[12]

12. However, a rude awakening is in store for the person who thinks that penance is necessary only for those aspiring to membership in the kingdom of God. He who

is already a member of Christ must learn of necessity to keep a rein upon himself. Only so will he be able to drive away the enemy of his soul and keep his baptismal innocence unsullied, or regain God's grace when it is lost by sin.

13. To become a member of Holy Church by baptism is to be clothed in the beauty with which Christ adorns His beloved Bride. "Christ loved the Church and delivered Himself up for her; that he might sanctify her, cleansing her in the bath of water by means of the word of life; in order that he might present to himself the Church in all her glory, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she might be holy and without blemish." [13]

14. This being so, well may those sinners who have stained the white robe of their sacred baptism fear the just punishments of God. Their remedy is "to wash their robes in the blood of the Lamb" [14] -- to restore themselves to their former splendor in the sacrament of Penance -- and to school themselves in the practice of Christian virtue. Hence the Apostle Paul's severe warning: "A man making void the law of Moses dies without any mercy on the word of two or three witnesses; how much worse punishments do you think he deserves, who has trodden under foot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant through which he was sanctified, and has insulted the Spirit of grace? . . . It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God." [15].

15. Certainly, Venerable Brethren, when one views the faith which distinguishes the Church, the sacraments which nourish and perfect her, the universal laws and precepts which govern her, the unfailing glory that is hers by reason of the heroic virtue and constancy of so many of her elect, there can be no doubt that the Bride of Christ, so dear to her divine Redeemer, has always kept herself holy and unsullied.

16. But of her children there are some who nevertheless forget the greatness of their calling and election. They mar their God-given beauty, and fail to mirror in themselves the image of Jesus Christ. We cannot find it in Us to threaten or abuse them, for the love We bear them is a father's love. Instead We appeal to them in the words of the Council of Trent -- the best restorative for Catholic discipline.

"When we put on Christ in baptism (Gal. 3.27), we become in Him an entirely new creature and obtain the full and complete remission of every sin. It is only with great effort and with great compunction on our part that we can obtain the same newness and sinlessness in the sacrament of penance, for such is the stipulation of divine justice. That is why the holy Fathers called penance 'a laborious kind of baptism.'" [16]

17. The very frequency with which this call to penance is reiterated makes it imperative for Christians to recognize it as coming from the divine Redeemer for the purpose of bringing about their spiritual renewal. It is transmitted to us by the Church, in her sacred liturgy, in the teaching of the Fathers and the precepts of the Councils. "Make our souls to glow in Thy sight with desire of Thee." [17] "Help us to repress our worldly appetites, that we may the more easily obtain the blessings of heaven." [18] That is how the Catholic Church prays to God's Supreme Majesty in these ancient prayers from the Lenten liturgy.

18. Can we wonder, then, that Our predecessors, when they were preparing the ground for an Ecumenical Council, made a point of exhorting the faithful to perform

salutary acts of penance?

19. Consider, for example, the words of Innocent III before the Fourth Lateran Council: "To your praying add fasting and almsgiving. It is on these wings that our prayers fly the more swiftly and effortlessly to the holy ears of God, that He may mercifully hear us in the time of need." [19]

20. Before the Second Ecumenical Council of Lyons, Gregory X wrote to all his prelates and chaplains commanding them to observe a three-day fast. [20]

21. And finally, Pius IX exhorted all the faithful to prepare themselves worthily and joyously for the First Vatican Council by ridding their souls of every stain of sin and the punishment due to sin. "It is certain," he said, "that men's prayers are more pleasing to God if they go up to Him from a pure heart; from souls, that is, that are free from all sin." [21]

22. We too, Venerable Brethren, on the example of Our predecessors, are most anxious that the whole Catholic world, both clerical and lay, shall prepare itself for this great event, the forthcoming Council, by ardent prayer, good works, and the practice of Christian penance.

23. Clearly the most efficacious kind of prayer for gaining the divine protection is prayer that is offered publicly by the whole community; for Our Redeemer said: "Where two or three are gathered together for my sake, there am I in the midst of them." [22]

24. The situation, therefore, demands that Christians today, as in the days of the early Church, shall be of "one heart and one soul," [23] imploring God with prayer and penance to grant that this great assembly may measure up to all our expectations.

25. The salutary results we pray for are these: that the faith, the love, the moral lives of Catholics may be so re-invigorated, so intensified, that all who are at present separated from this Apostolic See may be impelled to strive actively and sincerely for union, and enter the one fold under the one Shepherd. [24]

26. To achieve greater unanimity in this prayer, Venerable Brethren, We would have you organize a solemn novena to the Holy Spirit in all the parishes of your diocese immediately preceding the Ecumenical Council. The object of this novena will be to beg for an abundance of heavenly light and supernatural aid for the Fathers in council. To all who join in this novena We impart from the Church's treasury a plenary indulgence, obtainable on the usual conditions.

27. Then, too, a public act of prayer and propitiation might fittingly be arranged in every diocese and, in conjunction with it, a special course of sermons, to serve as a fervent invitation to the faithful to redouble their works of mercy and penance. By this means they may hope to propitiate Almighty God and thus obtain by their prayers that renewal of Christian life which is one of the principal aims of the coming Council. As Our Predecessor Pius XI so aptly observed: "Prayer and penance are the two potent inspirations sent to us at this time by God, that we may bring back to Him our wayward human race that wanders aimlessly without a guide. They are inspirations that will disperse and remedy the first and foremost cause of all rebellion and unrest, man's revolt against God." [25]

28. Our first need is for internal repentance; the detestation, that is, of sin, and the determination to make amends for it. This is the repentance shown by those who

make a good Confession, take part in the Eucharistic Sacrifice and receive Holy Communion. The faithful should be specially encouraged to do this during the novena to the Holy Spirit, for external acts of penance are quite obviously useless unless accompanied by a clear conscience and the detestation of sin. Hence Christ's severe warning: "Unless you repent you will all perish in the same manner." [26] God forbid that any of Our sons and daughters succumb to this danger.

29. But the faithful must also be encouraged to do outward acts of penance, both to keep their bodies under the strict control of reason and faith, and to make amends for their own and other people's sins. St. Paul was caught up to the third heaven -- he reached the summit of holiness -- and yet he had no hesitation in saying of himself "I chastise my body and bring it into subjection." [27] On another occasion he said: "They who belong to Christ have crucified their flesh with its passions and desires." [28] St. Augustine issued the same insistent warning: "It is not enough for a man to change his ways for the better and to give up the practice of evil, unless by painful penance, sorrowing humility, the sacrifice of a contrite heart and the giving of alms he makes amends to God for all that he has done wrong." [29]

30. External penance includes particularly the acceptance from God in a spirit of resignation and trust of all life's sorrows and hardships and of everything that involves inconvenience and annoyance in the conscientious performance of the obligations of our daily life and work and the practice of Christian virtue. Penance of this kind is in fact inescapable. Yet it serves not only to win God's mercy and forgiveness for our sins, and His heavenly aid for the Ecumenical Council, but also sweetens, one might almost say, the bitterness of this mortal life of ours with the promise of its heavenly reward. For "the sufferings of the present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory to come that will be revealed in us." [30]

31. But besides bearing in a Christian spirit the inescapable annoyances and sufferings of this life, the faithful ought also take the initiative in doing voluntary acts of penance and offering them to God. In this they will be following in the footsteps of our divine Redeemer who, as the Prince of the Apostles said, "died once for sins, the Just for the unjust; that he might bring us to God. Put to death indeed in the flesh, he was brought to life in the spirit." [31] Since, therefore, Christ has suffered in the flesh," it is only fitting that we be "armed with the same intent." [32]

32. It is right, too, to seek example and inspiration from the great saints of the Church. Pure as they were, they inflicted such mortifications upon themselves as to leave us almost aghast with admiration. And as we contemplate their saintly heroism, shall not we be moved by God's grace to impose on ourselves some voluntary sufferings and deprivations, we whose consciences are perhaps weighed down by so heavy a burden of guilt?

33. And who does not know that this sort of penance is the more acceptable to God in that it springs not from the natural infirmities of soul or body, but from a free and generous resolve of the will, and as such is a most welcome sacrifice in God's sight?

34. Finally, the object of the Ecumenical Council, as everyone knows, will be to

render more effective that divine work which our Redeemer accomplished. Christ our Lord accomplished it by being "offered . . . because it was his own will." [33] He accomplished it not merely by teaching men His heavenly doctrine, but also, and more especially, by pouring out His most precious blood for their salvation. Yet each of us can say with St. Paul: "I now rejoice in my sufferings . . . and fill up those things that are wanting of the sufferings of Christ, in my flesh, for his body, which is the Church." [34]

35. Let us then be alert and generous, and take full advantage of this opportunity of offering up our sorrows and sufferings to God "for building up the body of Christ," [35] the Church. No fairer, no more desirable fate could befall us than to be given a share in that work which has as its object the eternal salvation of men who have strayed far too often from the right path of truth and virtue.

36. Jesus Christ taught us self-discipline and self-denial when He said: "If anyone wishes to come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me." [36] Yet there are many people, alas, who join instead the immoderate quest for earthly pleasures, thus debasing and weakening the nobler powers of the human spirit. It is all the more necessary, therefore, for Christians to repudiate this unworthy way of life which gives frequent rein to the turbulent emotions of the soul and seriously endangers its eternal salvation. They must repudiate it with all the energy and courage displayed by the martyrs and those heroic men and women who have been the glory of the Church in every age of her history. If everyone does this, each in his own station in life, he will be enabled to play his individual part in making this Second Ecumenical Vatican Council, which is especially concerned with the refurbishing of Christian morality, an outstanding success.

37. So much for the subject of Our letter, Venerable Brethren, and it is Our confident hope that both you yourselves and, at your instigation, all Our sons throughout the world, both clerical and lay, will give a whole-hearted and generous response to Our fatherly appeals. Everyone wants the forthcoming Ecumenical Council to give all possible impetus to the spread of Christianity. It must give louder and louder utterance to that "word by which the kingdom is preached" mentioned in the parable of the sower, [37] and help to bring about the wider extension of the kingdom of God" in the world. But all this must depend to a large extent on the dispositions of the souls which the Council will be endeavoring to inspire to truth and virtue, to the worship of God both in private and in public, to a disciplined life and to missionary zeal.

38. Do your utmost, Venerable Brethren; explore every avenue that is open to you; have no hesitation in mustering all your authority and available resources in an effort to persuade the faithful under your charge to purify their souls by penance and to enkindle them with the fervor of piety. The "good seed" which the Council will scatter far and wide over the Church in those days must not be allowed to go to waste; it must find its way into hearts that are ready and prepared, loyal and true. If such is the case, then the forthcoming Council will indeed be for the faithful, a fruitful source of eternal salvation.

39. "Behold, now is the acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation." [38] These are words which We consider most applicable to that period of time which will shortly be upon us when the Ecumenical Council is in session. But when God in

His Providence decrees to give His supernatural gifts to men, He does so in the measure of their own individual desires and dispositions. Hence Our long-continued insistence on the spiritual preparation of Christians for this great event. Hence, too, the supreme importance of giving heed to this final invitation of Ours addressed to those who are willing to be guided by Our demands.

40. We, Venerable Brethren, must lead the way; and may all the faithful -- especially priests, monks and nuns, children, the sick and the afflicted -- join us in praying and doing penance, that God may give His Church the abundance of light and grace that is so necessary for her at this time. For will not Almighty God surely be lavish with His gifts, after receiving so many gifts from His children; gifts which breathe the scent of myrrh, the sweet fragrance of their filial devotion?

41. Then, too, what a wonderful, what a heartening spectacle of religious fervor it will be to see the countless armies of Christians throughout the world devoting themselves to assiduous prayer and voluntary self-denial in response to Our appeals! This is the sort of religious fervor with which the Church's sons and daughters should be imbued. May their example be an inspiration to those who are so immersed in the affairs of this world as to be neglectful of their duties towards God.

42. If you can implement these desires of Ours; if when you leave your dioceses to come to Rome for the Council, you can come laden with such spiritual riches as these, then we may hope indeed to see the dawning of a new and fairer age for the Catholic Church throughout the world.

43. Buoyed up by this assurance, Venerable Brethren, We lovingly impart to you and to all the clergy and faithful committed to your loyal care, that pledge of heaven's graces, that earnest of Our fatherly good will, Our Apostolic Blessing.

44. Given at Rome, at St. Peter's, on the 1st day of July, the Feast of the Most Precious Blood of Our Lord Jesus Christ, in the year 1962, the fourth of Our Pontificate.

REFERENCES:

1. Cf. apostolic constitution *Humanae salutis*, AAS 54 (1962) 12. English translation in TPS VII, 353-61.
2. Matt. 28.[20]
3. Luke 10.16.
4. Cf. Matt. 28.19-20.
5. Cf. Exod. 32.6-35; and I Cor. 10.[7]
6. Joel 2.12-13, 17.
7. Matt. 3.2.
8. Ibid. 4. 17.
9. Luke 17.21.
10. Matt. 11.12.
11. Acts 2.38.
12. Rom. 14.17.
13. Eph. 5.25-27.
14. Cf. Apoc. 7.14.
15. Heb. 10.28-29 and 31.

16. Council of Trent, Sess. XIV, doctrina de Sacramento Paenitentiae ch. 2, cf. St. Greg. Naz., Orat. 39.17: PG 36.356; St. John Dam., De fide orthod. 4.9; PG 94.11, 24.
17. Collect for Tuesday in the first week in Lent.
18. Collect for Wednesday in the fourth week in Lent.
19. Epist. ad Council Later. IV spectantes, Epist. 28 ad fideles per Moguntinas provincias constitutos, Mansi, Amplissimi Coll. Concil. 22, Paris and Leipzig, 1903, Col.959.
20. Cf. Mansi, loc. cit. 24, Col 62.
21. Cf. Act. et Decr. Sac. Concil. Recent., Coll. Lac. tom. VII, Freiburg im Breisgau, 1890, Col 10.
22. Matt. 18.20.
23. Acts 4.32.
24. Cf. John 10.16.
25. Encyclical letter Caritate Christi compulsi, AAS 24 (I[932])[191].
26. Luke 13.5.
27. 1 Cor. 9.27.
28. Gal. 5.24.
29. Serm. 351, 5.12; PL 39.1549.
30. Rom.8.18.
31. 1 Peter 3.18.
32. Cf. ibid. 4.1.
33. Isa. 53.7.
34. Col. 1.24.
35. Eph. 4.12.
36. Luke 9.23.
37. Matt. 13.19.
38. 2 Cor. 6.2.