



ENCYCLICAL LETTER

**PAENITENTIAM AGERE**

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Encyclical Letter of His Holiness

POPE JOHN XXIII

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# ENCYCLICAL LETTER

## ON APPLYING THE MERITS OF PENANCE FOR THE SUCCESS OF THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL

TO OUR VENERABLE BRETHREN, THE PATRIARCHS,  
PRIMATES, ARCHBISHOPS, BISHOPS AND OTHER  
ORDINARIES IN PEACE AND COMMUNION  
WITH THE APOSTOLIC SEE

POPE JOHN XXIII

VENERABLE BRETHREN  
HEALTH AND APOSTOLIC BENEDECTION

To do penance for one's own sins, according to the explicit teaching of Our Lord Jesus Christ, constitutes for the sinner not only the means of obtaining forgiveness but also the means of achieving eternal salvation.

It appears obvious, therefore, how justified is the constant attitude of the Catholic Church, the dispenser of Divine Redemption, which has always considered penance an indispensable condition for perfecting the life of its own sons and for its better future.

It is for this reason that in the Apostolic Constitution by which We convoked the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, We deemed it natural to address an invitation to the faithful to prepare themselves worthily for the great event, not only through prayer, the ordinary practice of the Christian virtues, but also through voluntary mortification <sup>1</sup>.

With the approach of the council, it seems natural to Us to renew the same exhortation with greater insistence, since the Lord, although He is present in His Church "all days even until the consumation of the world" <sup>2</sup>, will become still closer to the minds and hearts of men, according to His own words, through those who represent Him: "He who hears you, hears Me." <sup>3</sup>

Since the ecumenical council is in reality a gathering of the successors of the Apostles, to whom the Divine Saviour entrusted the mission of instructing the peoples of the earth, teaching them to observe all that which he had commanded<sup>4</sup>, the council seeks to signify a greater affirmation of the divine laws in relation to humanity redeemed by the Blood of Christ, and of the duties which bring men close to their God and Saviour.

Well, if we consult the books of the Old and New Testament, we notice that every event of a more solemn encounter between God and humanity—to express Ourselves in human words—has always been preceded by a more persuasive reminder to pray and to do penance.

Moses did not, in fact, hand the tables of the Divine Law to the Hebrews until they had done penance for their sins of idolatry and ingratitude<sup>5</sup>.

The prophets constantly exhorted the people of Israel to pray to God with a contrite heart, in order to cooperate in the fulfillment of the designs of Providence which accompanied the whole history of the chosen people.

Most moving among all is the voice of the prophet Joel, which is heard in the holy liturgy of Lent: "Now, therefore, saith 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 shall say: Spare, Oh Lord, spare thy people; and give not thy inheritance to reproach, that the heathen should rule over them. Why should they say among the nations, where is their God?"<sup>6</sup>

These invitations to do penance, rather than lessening, become constantly more solemn with the coming of the Son of God on earth. Behold, in fact, John the Baptist, the precursor of the Lord who begins his preaching with the cry: "Do penance, for the Kingdom of God is at hand".<sup>7</sup>

And Jesus Himself began His ministry with the immediate revelation of the sublime truths of faith, but also together with an invitation to purify the mind and heart of every residue of sin, which could prevent the fruitful welcome of the good news. "From that time Jesus began to preach and to say, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand'"<sup>8</sup>.

Still more than the prophets, the Saviour demanded from His hearers the complete law of God. "Behold the Kingdom of God is among you"<sup>9</sup>; Penance is strength against the forces

of evil. We are taught by Jesus Christ Himself, "the Kingdom of heaven has been enduring violent assault, and the violent have been seizing it by force." <sup>10</sup>

A similar reminder is sounded in the preaching of the Apostles. St. Peter, in fact, said, speaking to the crowds after Pentecost that they might be prepared to receive the sacrament of regeneration in Christ and the gifts of the Holy Spirit: "Repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ every one of you for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." <sup>11</sup>

And the Apostle of the Gentiles admonished the Romans that the Kingdom of God does not consist of arrogance nor of the unchecked enjoyment of the senses but of the triumph of justice and of interior peace: "For the Kingdom of God does not consist in food and drink, but in justice and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit." <sup>12</sup>

It must not be believed that the invitation to do penance is addressed only to those who are to become, for the first time, part of the Kingdom of God. In reality it is the need and duty of all Christians to do violence to themselves, either to drive away their own spiritual enemies or to preserve their baptismal innocence or to renew the life of grace which has been lost by transgressing the divine precepts.

Although it is true, in fact, that all those who have become members of the Church through Holy Baptism share the beauty conferred on it by Christ, according to the words of St. Paul:

"Christ also 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; 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." <sup>13</sup>

It is also true that all those who have stained the white baptismal robe by serious faults must fear greatly the punishment of God if they do not try to make it white and shining again through the Blood of the Lamb <sup>14</sup>, through the sacrament of Penance and the practice of Christian virtues.

Therefore, there is also addressed to them the severe admonishment of the Apostle Paul: "A man making void the Law of Moses dies without 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 terrible to fall into the hands of the living God.”<sup>15</sup>

Venerable brothers, the Church, the beloved spouse of the Divine Saviour, has always remained in itself holy and immaculate by means of the faith which enlightens it, by means of the sacrifices which sanctify it, by means of the laws which govern it and by means of the many members who adorn it with the beauty of heroic virtues.

But there are also deaf children who, forgetful of their vocation and of their chosen status, mar within themselves this heavenly beauty and who do not reflect in themselves the divine likeness of Jesus Christ.

Well, We address to all of them words—rather than reproofs or threats—words of paternal exhortation to keep in mind this comforting teaching of the Council of Trent, the very faithful echo of Catholic teaching:

“Clothed with Christ in Baptism (*Galatians* 3:27), through it, in fact, we become a completely new being, receiving the full and complete remission of all sins; but we cannot achieve this newness and fullness, however, by means of penance without great sorrow and effort, since this is required by Divine Justice, and in this way, penance has been justly called by the Holy Fathers a ‘certain, laborious Baptism’”<sup>16</sup>.

The reminder to do penance as an instrument of purification and of spiritual renewal must not, therefore, resound as a novel voice in the Christian ear, but rather as an invitation of Jesus Himself which has been repeated often by the Church, through the voice of the holy liturgy, of the Holy Fathers and of the councils.

It is thus that for centuries the Church has prayed God during the period of Lent: “*ut apud te mens nostra tuo desiderio fulgeat, quae se carnis maceratione castigat*” (that our soul, purified by the discipline of our body, may be filled with an ardent desire for Thee)<sup>17</sup>, and also “*ut terrenis affectibus mitigatis, facilius caelestia capiamus*” (that in restraining our earthly appetites we may the more easily receive Thy heavenly delights)<sup>18</sup>.

There is, therefore, no reason for surprise if Our predecessors, in preparing for the celebration of ecumenical councils, have concerned themselves with exhorting the faithful to practice salutary penance. It is enough to recall a few examples.

As the Fourth Lateran Council approached, Pope Innocent III exhorted the sons of the Church with these words: "May fasting and alms-giving be joined to prayer, that our prayers may fly more easily and quickly upon these two wings to the ear of the most merciful God and that He may hear us benevolently at the opportune time" <sup>19</sup>.

Gregory X, in a letter addressed to all his prelates and chaplains, established that the solemn opening of the Second Ecumenical Council of Lyons be preceded by three days of fasting.

Pius IX exhorted all the faithful to prepare worthily and in perfect joy for celebration of the Vatican Ecumenical Council, purifying their minds of every stain of fault or punishable guilt: "Since it is a known fact that the prayers of men are heard more by God when man turns toward Him with a clean heart, that is, with a mind purified of all sin" <sup>21</sup>.

Following the example of Our predecessors, We also, venerable brothers, ardently wish to invite the whole Catholic world, clergy and laity—to prepare for the great council's celebration through prayer, good works and penance.

Since public prayer is the most efficacious means of obtaining divine graces, according to the promises of Christ Himself: "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, I am with them" <sup>22</sup>, all the faithful must be, therefore "one single heart and one single soul," <sup>23</sup> as in the first ages of the Church, and obtain from God through prayer and penance that this extraordinary event may produce those salutary fruits which are expected by all.

That is, such a great revival of the Catholic faith, such a great reblossoming of charity and such a development of Christian morals, that there may be awakened even among separated brethren a strong and efficacious desire for sincere and operative unity in one single flock under one single shepherd.

For this purpose, We exhort you, venerable brothers, to institute in every parish of the diocese entrusted to each of you, just before the opening of the council, a solemn novena in honor of the Holy Spirit to invoke upon the fathers of the council the advantages of heavenly light and of divine graces.

In this respect, We wish to place at the disposal of the faithful part of the spiritual treasure of the Church. That is, to all those who will take part in the aforementioned novena, there

will be granted a plenary indulgence which will be gained under the usual conditions.

It will also be opportune to institute in the individual dioceses a propitiating penitential service. This service must be a fervent invitation, accompanied by a special series of sermons, to perform works of mercy and penance, by means of which all the faithful may seek to propitiate Almighty God and implore of Him that real renewal of the Christian spirit which is one of the principal objectives of the council.

As Our predecessor, Pius XI, of venerable memory, justly stated: "Prayer and penance are the two powerful means given to us by God to lead back to Him wretched humanity which is erring here and there without guidance; prayer and penance remove and repair the first and principal cause of every upheaval, that is, the rebellion of man against God." <sup>25</sup>

Interior penance is necessary above all. That is, remorse and purification from one's own sins which is obtained especially by means of a good confession and communion with the aid of the Eucharistic sacrifice.

All the faithful must be invited to perform this kind of penance during the novena to the Holy Spirit. Exterior forms of penance would be useless in fact if they were not accompanied by interior cleansing of the soul and by sincere remorse for one's sins.

It is in this sense that one must understand the severe admonishment of Jesus: "If you do not repent, you will all perish in the same way" <sup>26</sup>. May God remove this danger from all those who have been entrusted to Us!

Moreover, the faithful must be invited also to practice exterior penance, either through the body which must be governed by honest reasoning and by faith, or through the expiation of our sins and of those of others.

St. Paul himself, who ascended into the third heaven and who had reached the summit of sanctity, did not, in fact, hesitate to say of himself: "I chastise my body and bring it into subjection" <sup>27</sup>. Elsewhere he admonished: "and they who belong to Christ crucified their flesh with its passions and desires." <sup>28</sup>.

St. Augustine insisted on the same admonition in this manner: "It is not enough to improve one's conduct and withdraw from evil, but atonement also must be made to God for the evils that have been done, by the pain of penance, by the cries of



humility, by the sacrifice of a contrite heart and by the giving of alms." 29

The first exterior penance that all of us must practice is that of accepting from God with a resigned and trusting spirit, all the sorrows and sufferings that we encounter in life and that which involves effort and inconvenience in fulfilling the obligations of our condition in our daily life and in the practice of Christian virtues.

This necessary practice serves the purpose not only of purifying us, of appeasing the Lord and of invoking His help for the happy and fruitful success of the forthcoming ecumenical council; it also makes our punishment lighter and almost sweeter, inasmuch as it holds out to us the hope of eternal reward: "the sufferings of the present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory to come that will be revealed in us." 30

In addition to the penance which we must necessarily face because of the inevitable sorrows of this mortal life, Christians must be generous enough to offer also to God voluntary mortifications in the imitation of our Divine Redeemer Who, according to the Prince of the Apostles, "died also 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 Christ therefore has suffered in the flesh," let us also arm ourselves "with the same intent" 32. May the saints of the Church also be an example and encouragement in this respect; the saints whose mortifications, inflicted on their often innocent bodies, fill us with wonder and almost with dismay.

Before these champions of Christian charity, how can one fail to offer to the Lord a few sacrifices or voluntary punishments on the part also of the faithful, who probably have so many sins to expiate?

These are all the more pleasing to God, inasmuch as they do not originate from the natural infirmity of our flesh and of our spirit, but are offered spontaneously and generously to the Lord as a sweet sacrifice.

It is clear to everyone that the Ecumenical Council looks forward, through us, to an ever greater increase of the divine work of redemption which Our Lord Jesus Christ accomplished, ("He was offered because He willed it." 33) not only by revealing to men His heavenly doctrine, but especially by pouring out His most Precious Blood for their salvation.

Well, since each one of us can state together with St. Paul the Apostle: "I rejoice in the sufferings I bear . . . and what is lacking of the sufferings of Christ I fill up in my flesh for his body, which is the Church"<sup>34</sup>, we too must be glad that we can offer our sufferings to God "for the building up of the body of Christ"<sup>35</sup> which is the Church.

We must feel ourselves indeed all the more happy and honored that we are called upon to participate in this redeeming of poor humanity which is too often drawn away from the honest road of truth and virtue.

Instead of mortifications and self-denial, imposed by Jesus Christ on all His followers with the words: "If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me"<sup>36</sup>, many unfortunately seek rather frantically earthly pleasures and disfigure and weaken the noblest energies of the spirit.

Against this irregular way of living, which unchains often the lowest passions and brings eternal salvation into grave danger, it is necessary that Christians react with the strength of the martyrs and saints, who have always given testimony for the Catholic Church.

In such a way all can contribute, according to their particular status, to the better outcome of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, which must bring about a reblossoming of Christian life.

After these paternal exhortations, We trust, venerable brothers, that you will not only receive them with enthusiasm but also that you will encourage Our Sons, the clergy and the laity, to receive them also wherever they are scattered throughout the world.

If in fact, as is anticipated by all, the ecumenical council is to bring about a truly great increase in the Catholic religion; if it is to make the "word of the kingdom" resound more solemnly, the word which is mentioned in the parable of the sower<sup>37</sup>; if we seek the consolidation and the ever wider diffusion of the Kingdom of God throughout the world by means of the council, the happy success of all this will depend in great part on the dispositions of those to whom will be addressed its teachings of truth, of virtue, of public and private worship of God, of discipline and of the missionary apostolate.

See to it, therefore, Venerable Brothers, without delay, explore every avenue which remains and, as far as in you lies,

bring to bear your authority and your power that the faithful of Christ whom you feed might cleanse their souls by the merits of penance and inflame them with the fire of devotion, and do not let them smother the good seed which is being spread far and wide in these days, but let them receive it with a quick and firm conviction, that by so doing they might draw unto themselves a great deal of solid assistance for their eternal salvation.

As a final thought, We believe that there can be justly applied to the forthcoming council, the words of the Apostle: "Behold, now is the acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation" <sup>38</sup>. But the designs of the Divine Providence of God requires that His gifts be distributed according to the disposition of mind of each individual.

Therefore, may those people who wish to be filially docile to Us, who have striven for a long time to prepare the hearts of Christians for this great event, give their diligent attention also to this Our final invitation.

Following, therefore, Our and your example, venerable brothers, may the faithful—and in the first place all priests, male and female Religious, children, the sick and those who suffer—raise prayers and practice penance to obtain from God for His Church that abundance of light and supernatural assistance which it will need especially at that time (of the council).

How could we believe that God would refuse the abundance of heavenly graces, when He receives from His sons such great profusion of gifts which breathe with the fervor of piety and the fragrance of myrrh?

Moreover, all Christian people, answering Our exhortation by dedicating themselves more intensely to prayer and to the practice of mortification, will offer an admirable and moving spectacle of that spirit of faith, which animates every son of the Church without distinction.

This will not fail to move in a salutary manner also the minds of those who, excessively preoccupied with and distracted by earthly matters, have allowed themselves to become neglectful of their religious duties.

If all this comes about, as is Our desire, and if you can leave your dioceses to come to Rome for the celebration of the council, bringing with you such a precious treasure of spiritual assets, one will have legitimate grounds to hope that there may dawn a new and more propitious hour for the Catholic Church.

Sustained by this hope, We impart wholeheartedly to you, venerable brothers, to the clergy and to the people entrusted to your care, the apostolic benediction, as a token of heavenly favors and the testimony of Our paternal good will.

Given in Rome, at St. Peter's, on July 1, 1962, the feast of the Most Precious Blood of Our Lord Jesus Christ, the fourth year of Our pontificate.

—POPE JOHN XXIII

#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Apostolic Constitution *Humanae salutis*; A.A.S., LIV, (1962), p. 12.

<sup>2</sup> *Matthew* 28, 20.

<sup>3</sup> *Luke* 10, 16.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. *Matthew* 28, 19-20.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. *Exodus* 32, 6-35; and 1 *Corinthians* 10, 7.

<sup>6</sup> *Joel* 2, 12-13, 17.

<sup>7</sup> *Matthew* 3, 1.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* 4, 17.

<sup>9</sup> *Luke* 17, 21.

<sup>10</sup> *Matthew* 11, 12.

<sup>11</sup> *The Acts* 2, 38.

<sup>12</sup> *Romans* 14, 17-18.

<sup>13</sup> *Ephesians* 5, 26-27.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. *Apocalypse* 7, 14.

<sup>15</sup> *Hebrews* 10, 28-30.

<sup>16</sup> Council of Trent, Session XIV, Doctrine on the Sacrament of Penance, Chapter II, Cf. St. Gregory Nazianzen, Oration 39, 17; *PG* 36, 356; St. John Damascene, *De fide Orthodoxa*, 4, 9: *PG* 94, 11, 24.

<sup>17</sup> Oration, for Tuesday after the first Sunday of Lent.

<sup>18</sup> Oration, for Wednesday after the fourth Sunday of Lent.

<sup>19</sup> Letter to the participants in the Fourth Lateran Council, Epistle 28 to the faithful for *Moguntinas provincias constitutos*, in Mansi, *Amplissimi Coll. Concil.* 22, Paris and Leipzig, 1903, col. 959.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Mansi, *op. men.*, 24, col. 62.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Acts and Decrees of the Sac. Concil. *Recent. Coll. Lac.* Tom VII, Fribourg and Brigovia, 1890, col. 10.

<sup>22</sup> *Matthew* 28, 20.

<sup>23</sup> *Acts* 4, 32.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. *John* 10, 16.

<sup>25</sup> Encyclical Letter *Caritate Christi compulsi*, A.A.S., 24 (1932), p. 191.

<sup>26</sup> *Luke* 13, 5.

<sup>27</sup> I *Corinthians* 9, 27.

<sup>28</sup> *Galatians* 5, 24.

<sup>29</sup> *Sermons*, 351, 5, 12; *PL* 39, 1549.

<sup>30</sup> *Romans* 8, 18.

<sup>31</sup> I *Peter* 3, 18.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. *Ibid.* 4, 1.

<sup>33</sup> *Is.* 53, 7.

<sup>34</sup> *Colossians* 1, 24.

<sup>35</sup> *Ephesians* 4, 12.

<sup>36</sup> *Luke* 9, 23.

<sup>37</sup> *Matthew* 13, 19.

<sup>38</sup> II *Corinthians* 6, 2.