

48. PENITENT

(Penance)

Summary:

1. Definition of the term. – 2. Penance as a virtue. 2.1. Necessity of penance. 2.2. Definition of penance. 2.3. The three acts of penance. 2.4. Limits and dangers of penance. 2.5. Penance in conformity with Jesus Christ. 2.6. Profession of a Penitent. 2.7. Prayers inspired by the spirit of penitence. – 3. Conclusion.

1. DEFINITION OF THE TERM

In this article the term, penance, is restricted to the idea of a virtue, or a spirit. The article does not deal with the sacrament of penance, or penance in the sense of punishment or correction as used in school (See **Correction**), though it will deal with penance in relation to the exercise of the accusation of faults, the advertisement of defects, and for occasions when a Brother falls into a fault and accepts a penance as satisfaction or as a means of preventing further falls (See **Exercises**).

2. PENANCE AS A VIRTUE

2.1. The necessity of penance

The teaching of La Salle on the virtue of penance takes up an entire chapter in his treatise, *Devoirs d'un chrétien envers Dieu*, (The Duties of a Christian Towards God), under the title of "Penance as a Virtue and its Necessity" (Da 274-279). In developing his thought he relies especially on the statement of the Council of Trent: "Penance has always been necessary for all those who have committed mortal sin, in order to obtain grace and justification" (Da 274).¹ La Salle applies to the virtue what the Council says in this quotation about the sacrament; in this he keeps the sub-

stance of the teaching of Trent, which he cites with great exactness, as in Da 282a.

Throughout this chapter La Salle returns to the teachings of Trent concerning penance as a virtue, or as a complement to the sacrament.² Trent states, "Penance was not a sacrament before the coming of Jesus Christ, nor has it been since then for a person who has not been baptized".³ From this statement La Salle concludes, "It is necessary, then, that there be penance other than the sacrament, otherwise no one in the state of mortal sin would have been, or is now, able to be saved" (Da 275).

2.2. Definition of penance

La Salle defines penance as a virtue by which we conceive sorrow for our sins, with a resolution not to commit them again and to make satisfaction for them (Da 275).

2.3. The three acts of penance

The virtue of penance includes three acts: (1) horror and aversion not only for sin but also for everything that could lead to sin, or be an occasion to commit sin; (2) great sorrow for having offended God, because God is loved above all things, and a firm resolve not to offend God again; (3) zeal for the justice of God, ardent desire

to make satisfaction to God for sins. This zeal requires that we spend our whole life in profound humility and confusion because of our sins, and that we separate ourselves from everything that could lead us to offend God (Da 275).

In accord with the tradition of spiritual writers of the time La Salle affirms that "we ought to do penance all our lives", as the Council of Trent states, "the life of a Christian is one of continual penance".⁴

Penance is a form of satisfaction to God for the temporal punishment due to sin and a participation in the Passion of Christ.⁵ It is also a preventative, "A person separates himself from sin only insofar as he deprives himself of everything that could lead him to it" (Da 278). It is, then, the role of penance to keep us far away from sin.

2.4. Limits and dangers of penance

La Salle shows the limits of a penance which is not inspired by good motivation. He says, "There are those who perform exterior acts of penance that are painful and by which they would ordinarily make satisfaction for their sins, but they only do this out of human respect and to appear penitent and mortified before others; such penance is false". La Salle concludes, "In order to be valid, penance must come from the bottom of the heart and be present there before it appears exteriorly, otherwise a person ought not, and cannot, be assured of its sincerity".⁶

2.5. Penance in conformity with Jesus Christ

According to La Salle penance is necessary for all Christians; for the Brothers he insists that it is necessary in order that they conform to Jesus Christ. In the *Recueil* La Salle devotes one of the treatises to the "Principal Virtues that the Brothers Ought to Practice" (R 154). The fourth virtue is mortification of the spirit, the fifth is mortification of the senses, the sixth is penance, to which he adds a "Profession of a Penitent" (which will be treated in the next article) (R 169).

The doctrine of penance that La Salle explains in this treatise is taken directly from the teaching of Olier.⁷ He does not mention Olier as his source, and he leaves aside Olier's profound theoretical

considerations in order to focus on the practical aspects of penance. "Let your principal concern be to **clothe yourself with him [Jesus Christ] and this spirit of penance**; ask him often for the heart and the **dispositions** of a true penitent; **enter into the energy and the virtue of these practices**".

First, just as Jesus Christ becoming man "was made sin" and did penance for us, a penitent⁸ must always keep his sin before him; this must be the foundation of all the other duties that he is required to render to God in view⁹ of his sins.

Since La Salle relies so much on Olier, it seems appropriate at this point to cite Olier's text itself, so that it will be easier to compare it with what La Salle has kept almost to the letter in his *Recueil* (R 170).

"The sinner, because of his sins, ought with Our Lord to show a perpetual confusion on his face (Ps 37: 18). He ought to have this confusion first of all before God, just as Jesus Christ bore the shame of our offenses before his Father, according to these words, "confusion has covered my face" (Ps 68: 8).

Secondly, he ought to show confusion before the whole world, as the Son of God did, who says in the Prophet, "I am separated and withdrawn from the world, to live in solitude: I have become a stranger and a pilgrim to my brothers" (Ps 54: 8; 68: 9), that is, among the holy children of the Church. I was ashamed to be seen in their midst, charged with the crimes of everyone, carrying upon myself the horrible and shameful burden of the sins of the whole world. I was hidden in solitude for a period of time, and I have remained there always in spirit, as one unworthy to appear before the world and be with people.

Thirdly, this confusion ought to be in regard to ourselves also; we cannot put up, or bear with, ourselves on account of our shame and our pain. This is how the Son of God speaks of himself in the Prophet, "I was a burden to myself (Job 7:20); the embarrassment I suffer because of these horrible and hateful sins has caused me great suffering".¹⁰

For the third point of Olier, La Salle makes a slight adaptation in the text; Olier writes, "3. Because of the confusion that a sinner ought to bear because of his sins, he ought also to have the sorrow and the detestation for them that Our Lord had who lived in the perpetual sacrifice and agony

of a contrite heart for the sins of the world”.

Further on La Salle borrows some lines from Olier, “The penitent because of such great crimes ought, following his confusion and his condemnation, submit himself to remain subject every moment of his life to the eternal, infinite, and all powerful justice of God, in order to bear whatever it pleases God’s vengeance and punishment to impose on him”.¹¹

2.6. Profession of a Penitent

Olier’s Profession of Penitence¹² is closely linked to the virtue of penance, and La Salle encourages the Brothers to make it “from time to time,” urging them “to take everyday as a practice of penance whatever in your state and work gives you the most pain” (*Recueil*, 169, line 13). This confirms the fact that La Salle did not prescribe extraordinary penances, but the penance of the duties of everyday life in the Brothers’ vocation.

This “Profession”, as understood in the context of the 17th Century, is a public avowal, an open proclamation. Just as today there is the idea of a “Profession of Faith”, So the Profession of a Penitent is a declaration that a person intends to live in the spirit of all that has been stated about penance.

La Salle borrowed a good part of the text from Olier,¹³ but gave it special form by addressing his Profession directly to God: “In honor of Jesus Christ, YOUR SON, and in union with him, I make profession, O MY GOD, as a penitent before YOU, for my sins and for the sins of the whole world, to do penance every day of my life, and to look upon myself in all circumstances as a poor, miserable sinner, and a very unworthy penitent”. Olier, in his formula limits himself to a personal profession which is not addressed directly to God.

La Salle then arranges his prayer in five separate commitments:

First, to fulfill this obligation, I take the resolution to carry with me at all times an image of Jesus Christ, the sovereign penitent, TO LOOK AT IT AND TO KISS IT OFTEN, SO THAT BY HIS LOVING INTERIOR LOOK¹⁴ the remembrance of my obligation to do penance will be renewed in me.

Second, I offer my most humble apologies to the justice and the holiness of God which I have offended by my sins.

Third,¹⁶ I wish to enter today into all the interior dispositions of Jesus Christ penitent, in order to do penance with him as one of his members, one of his children.

Fourth, I offer all my actions to you, O MY GOD, and I ask you to receive them in satisfaction for my sins.

Fifth,¹⁷ TODAY, with the help of your grace, I will do such and such actions, ..., in a spirit of penance; I will suffer today such and such things, ..., and I will mortify myself on such and such occasions, ..., in order that God (who is just and ought not lose any right over his creatures may not exact from me in the next world an entire revenge and very rigorous punishment).

The Profession ends with a prayer which seems clearly to be that of La Salle: “Animate me, MY GOD, with the spirit of penance, and renew in me the gift I received from you at baptism; grant that I express these sentiments and these dispositions in all the conduct of my life. This, O MY GOD, is what I promise you I will do, and it is the grace that I ask of you through Jesus Christ, Our Lord. Amen” (R 171).

Penance is, then, regarded especially, as satisfaction for sin and not simply as a certain level of mortification, even though it may be near to it and may become such in the concrete, as is clear from the Profession of a Penitent.

2.7. Prayers inspired by the spirit of penance

According to the three acts included in the virtue of penance, the penitent ought to live in horror and regret for the sins that he has committed. This is what La Salle expresses in a prayer “to ask God for the grace to do penance according to the number and the greatness of one’s sins”. He ends the prayer saying, “... as I have been a miserable sinner by my malice, I will also be a true penitent by your goodness” (I 207).

In the study he devotes to Confession (I 173-233) there are other admirable prayers¹⁷ that are doctrinally sound and which develop the attitude of penance and reparation that La Salle desires to inculcate in a Christian. For example, there is an

“Act to ask God for the grace to do penance during all our lives, in order to make satisfaction to God for our sins:

Since a person can persevere in doing what is good only insofar as he loves and practices penance, I ask of you the grace, O my God, to pass no day without doing some penance for my sins. No matter how innocent your only Son, Jesus Christ, was, he passed no single moment during his whole life without suffering and practicing penance. You know, O my God, that my sins are considerable, and that I am unable to make satisfaction for a single one of them in strict justice, though I were to suffer all my life; give me at least the love of suffering; help me to unite myself to the suffering of your dear Son sacrificed for me on Calvary; give me a share in his penitent spirit and help me be like him in the practice of penance. Since it was on the Cross that he made himself our model and was a perfect penitent, grant that I may often remember him in that state in order that I may never forget what he has suffered for me, so that his example may encourage and move me never to cease to do penance as long as I shall live. Since it is you, O my God, who give me this desire, give me also the strength and the courage to put it into practice” (I 217).

Other prayers that could be cited are “the prayer to ask God for the grace of a true spirit of penance, (I 179) and the act of contrition that La Salle drew in large part from the seven penitential Psalms.¹⁸

3. CONCLUSION

For La Salle, as for the French School generally, conformity to Christ becomes participation in his state of suffering¹⁹ and it is in this same spirit that La Salle invites the Christian “to make himself be a victim, living and pleasing to God”.²⁰ by the spirit and practice of penance.

¹ CHANUT, *Le saint Concile de Trente*, Latin-French edition, Lyon, 1692, session XIX, p. 186.

² Cf. Anselmo A. BALOCCO, “Il ‘Tridentino’ nei ‘Devoirs’ del De La Salle,” in *Rivista lasalliana*, 1966, no. 1, p. 7.

³ CHANUT, *op. cit.*, session XIV, p. 186-187.

⁴ CHANUT, *op. cit.*, session XIV, p. 209.

⁵ Cf. Col. 1:24. La Salle comments, “This is the application which you ought to make by your sharing in his sufferings” *CL*, p. 86, MD 25:3.

⁶ Da 278. La Salle prays, “Inspire in me, O my God, a horror for this kind of penances, which are only exterior, and which do not prevent me from going to hell” (I 179).

⁷ OLIER, *Introduction à la Vie et aux Vertus chrétiennes*, revised text of François Amiot, Le Rameau, Paris, 1954, p. 74ff.

⁸ Olier writes, “a sinner,” *loc. cit.*

⁹ The phrase “in view of” (*en vue de*) does not express well the words of Olier, “as a consequence of” (*en suite de*) — which gives better the basic thought of La Salle; was this a lapse, or a mistake of the copyist?

¹⁰ OLIER, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

¹¹ *Ib.*, p. 76.

¹² Whereas Olier’s title is “Profession of Penance,” La Salle’s title is “Profession of a Penitent” (R 169). La Salle’s title fits the thought of the Profession more accurately.

¹³ OLIER, *op. cit.*, p. 73, fourth section, motives and profession of penance.

¹⁴ The words in capital letters are La Salle’s own words. They are capitalized to emphasize the religious motivation of the saint, which has not always been adequately pointed out.

¹⁵ La Salle introduces here some lines that are altogether his own and owe nothing to Olier. It is only at the end of the fifth point that he takes up again the thought of his spiritual teacher; which is put in parenthesis to make clear that they are Olier’s ideas. Compared with Olier, La Salle’s expression of them is less detailed.

¹⁶ This paragraph makes the commitment concrete according to La Salle’s idea that resolutions should be present, particular, and efficacious.

¹⁷ A. Rayez has remarked that this text is “entirely French school”. La Salle’s prayer is made in simple acts that are clear and thoughtful. (*Etudes lasalliennes*, in *RAM*, no. 109, January-March, 1952, p. 48.

¹⁸ *CL* 50, p. 68. (*Explanation of the Method of Mental Prayer*).

¹⁹ In *Announcing the Gospel to the poor Sauvage* and Campos make the same statement: “When La Salle speaks of ‘conformity’ with Jesus Christ, most of the time it is with Jesus Christ suffering” (*AEP* p. 194 of the French edition).

²⁰ Rom. 12:1. Cf. MD 66.3 and MF 102: 3: “Consider that you only become true disciples of Jesus Christ when you love him and bring yourself to suffer for his holy love” (See **Disciples**).

Complementary themes:

Correction; Exterior Mortification, Interior Mortification; Renouncement; Sacrament.

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