

The Value of Pennances

Allot of us, myself included, have questioned or still question the actual practical use of Pennances. Especially when it comes to such trivial 'sacrifices' as foregoing mat on Fridays, avoiding soda throughout Lent, or similiar pennances as those. How does this atone for guilt we may say?

First we need to understand the consequences of sin. The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches that sin has a double consequence. (1471). One of which is the 'eternal' consequence, the other the 'temporal' consequence. The eternal consequence is readily and immediately forgiven provided we contritely repent of our sins and ask forgiveness of them. Understanding the temporal consequences are a bit more complicated. This can be better viewed as creating thought or behavior patterns which we may fal back into later on in the future. For example, say when we're upset with a co-worker, and we alleviate the stress by blowing up and cursing him/her out. The first time may have been 'out-of-character' for you, but after completeion it becomes that much easier to react to the same situation in the same way to obtain teh same relief. The next time you could struggle against that primitively formed habit and thereby breal it. Conversely, you could give in and replay the same scenario, at which point the habit would be just a little bit more reinforced. If you never struggled against it, it time it could be so much a part of you character that you need not consciously even think about it before you reacted in such a way. At that point you may not even be aware that what you are doing is wrong anymore.

But all this is taking place on a spiritual level. Think of yourself as a being of light, cfreated in the image of God, who is Pure Light. Think of each and every sin as somehow diminishing that light, in proportion to the sins committed. Little sins, like imopure thoughts, for example, may just barely cloud your glass, while big sins, like murder, may be like a stripe of black paint being placed over another part of your glass. Both of these have real consequences, say one may lead, unchecked, to pornography, and on to adultery and on to whatever else. While the other may continually degrade into cruelty, mercilessness, and even more murder.

The more sins you pile up, the more cloudy and obscure your light becomes, so that in time, other beings can't even recognoze in you the good that you were created in, nor is your vision lookinhg out any clearer. (Titus 1:15..Lu 11:34).

The cloudy glass your looking out at the world through causes you to think everyone is out to get you, use you, hurt you, lie to you...etc. You also lose the ability to see the light in the world. which may cause ripple eeffects as you repulse good people and events from coming near you. So

you commit more sins to fight against people you mistakenly believe are out to harm you.

Now it is possible to remedy these character/spiritual defects, Just as our actions can cause our glass to become cloudy, and our lights to be diminished, we can also atone for sins and change course. Of course, anyone who has quit smoking, drug addiction, or any other addiction knows how much difficulty is involved in breaking such habits. It's painful and draining. That's because every act becomes a part of us. God is a God of justice. Everything will eventually balance in His creation.

What about Grace you may say? What about forgiveness? But He does forgive you, without forgiveness you would not even be able to clear up your smudges and distortions.. And He does give you Grace, without His Grace, you couldn't overcome and struggle against such a disordered character..

Think further, let's say that covetness has become so much a part of your character that it affects every little thing that comes out of your mouth when you see someone with something better than you. Over a lifetime this sin has gradually seeped deeper and deeper into your souls until it became a part of your innermost person. Let's say a moment before death you repented.

Now what would heaven be like if a disordered person like that was allowed in? And besides you was also admitted one who had an uncontrolled homicidal rage so ingrained into his character that he attacked any and everyone without hesitation on the slightest provocation? And on and on...

Pretty soon you would not have heaven anymore. You would have the same disordered world that we have now. Because not only the disordered individual would suffer for the darkness in his soul, but also everyone around him.

That's why the doctrine of Purgatory makes so much sense. We need to have our defects corrected and cured before we can peacefully relate to everyone else in heaven.

But penance gives us the chance to begin the process now. By even denying ourselves in the little trivial things, like foregoing soda during Lent, we can build up a tiny stepping stone of self-denial to reach a bigger cat later on. If you've spent a lifetime of betraying your friends and snitching on them every time you got into trouble to save yourself, how do you expect you will be able to overcome such a huge offense against the Virtue of Loyalty if you haven't even built up the self-discipline to deny yourself the use of a hundred dollars or so to help out a friend with his rent, and how could you do that if you're so accustomed to always, only thinking of yourself and never willing to forgo the tiniest convenience in aid of another?

Small penances lead to big penances. The soldier that gives his life to save his friends, The holy Martyrs that laid down their lives before renouncing the Faith...these were purer spiritual beings that we never will attain as long as we are unable to sacrifice in little things.