

# ON PENANCE.

## CATHOLIC ANECDOTES

### CHAPTER X.

## PENANCE.

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### I. - ON PENANCE IN GENERAL.

590. *The Boxing Mania.* -

We must do penance for our sins, my friends ; but our having so simple, and so easy a means of obtaining pardon is not a motive to encourage us to commit them more at our ease. There was in Rome, at the time it was still pagan, a libertine of a singular kind; he was called Lucius Neratus, and his greatest pleasure was, when , he met poor decent people in the street, if they seemed at all helpless, to give them a blow on either cheek. This silly ruffian paid dear for his strange mania, for the law of the Twelve Tables decreed a heavy fine for such offences. But this did not frighten Neratus; on the contrary, for greater convenience, he had a slave to follow him with a purse of silver. As often as he had yielded to this strange fancy, by striking people in the face, he caused the sum fixed by law to be counted out to the injured person, in order to prevent any complaint being lodged against him. He imagined that that was all he had to do, and that he used not give himself any further trouble; he was

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mistaken. As soon as the judges were made aware of this vile speculation, they abolished the ancient law and established a new one, whereby every personal offence was to be punished according to the gravity of the injury and the quality of the person offended.

Well! my friends, what instruction do you draw from this curious story?

Here it is: Impenitent sinners are like Neratus; they fancy it is sufficient for them to confess their sins and perform the penance imposed on them, and that nothing more is to be done. But when the Lord sees that the graces and means of salvation He sends us are abused, He, too, in some sort, changes His law: He permits that those who have had a presumptuous confidence in His divine mercy, and who encouraged themselves in evil by the facility of repairing it, see accomplished in their regard that sentence of Jesus Christ himself:

"Some sins are not forgiven in this world or the next." (Mt. 12:32)

- SCHMID et BELET, *Cat. Hist.*, III., 177.

591. *The Penance of Three Actors.* -

"Unless you all do penance, you all shall all perish," is said in Scripture and, dear friends, those words, well meditated upon, have made great sinners great saints.

There was at Tarsus, in Cilicia, a comedian, named Babylas, and two others, females, named Cometa and Nicosia, who led a very scandalous life. They were as yet all pagans. Babylas, passing one day by where there was an assembly of Christians, curiosity induced him to enter, and listen to an instruction that was being given. The text was precisely those words of St.

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John the Baptist: *Do penance, for the kingdom of God is at hand.* (Mt. 3:2)

The words of the preacher went straight to the heart of Babylas; he was touched, and resolved thenceforth to do penance. Arrived at home, he said to Cometa and Nicosa, his two accomplices, that he gave up the theatre (at that time a notorious source of scandal and immorality,) for evermore, to occupy himself solely with the salvation of his soul. He left them his fortune to divide between them. But behold, dear friends, the power of good example: this proposal touched the two women; they began to weep bitterly and addressed him in these words: "What! you have guided us to our ruin, and now that you are going to eternal life, you would leave us alone, you would abandon us to our hard fate. No, it shall not be; we have imitated you in your criminal life, we will also follow you in the way of penance that you embrace."

And they carried out their resolution. Babylas, to lead a solitary and penitential life, retired into a tower of the city ramparts, and the two others shut themselves up in a miserable cave, where they passed the rest of their days in retreat, and in the exercise of an austere and penitential life. It was thus that these poor sinners became holy penitents.

- SCHMID et BELET, *Cat. Hist.* II., 568.

592. *An Emperor in Public Penance.* -

I know not, in all ecclesiastical history, a penance more striking than that of Theodosius the Great. I am going to tell it to you somewhat abridged. That prince, having heard that the inhabitants of Thessalonica had revolted against his officers, and ignored his authority

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for a short space, had them massacred without any form of trial. Seven thousand persons were killed in that horrible carnage.

St. Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, hearing this tragical news, wrote a beautiful letter to the Emperor: "I have had a dream by night," said he, "and I thought I saw you coming to church, but I was not permitted to offer the Sacrifice." That holy bishop took this vision for a sign that God willed the Emperor to be deprived for a time of assisting at the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. (This was a common practice at the time in order to encourage notorious and public sinners to truly repent of their crimes. It is remarked by all the historians of those times how marvellously effective such a deprivation was in generating swift returns to moral behaviour.)

St. Ambrose continued exhorting Theodosius to do penance for his crime. On reading this letter the Emperor felt himself touched with repentance, and, on his returning to Milan, as he presented himself at the church, the holy bishop, who awaited him at the door, refused him admission with a firmness truly episcopal.

"Retire," said he, "and add not a new crime to those you have already committed."

Theodosius excused himself by the example of David who had made himself guilty of murder. Ambrose replied: "Since you have imitated him in his sin, imitate him in his penance." The Emperor, unable to reply, retired submissively to his palace with tears in his eyes; he abstained from going to church for eight whole months, living as a penitent unworthy to participate in the Holy Mysteries with the faithful, and he willingly submitted to the public penance.

He began by leaving off the imperial robes, with which he would not clothe himself again during the course of his penance; he laid them on the ground,

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and wept publicly for the sin he had committed, rather through passion and surprise than through malice.

Sozomenes, an ecclesiastical historian and contemporary, even says that the Emperor publicly confessed his fault in the church. He there assisted at the common prayers in the most humble posture, not standing or kneeling, like the others, but prostrate on the ground, saying with the penitent king: "My soul has cleaved to the pavement: quicken You me according to Your word." Then he tore his hair, struck his forehead and breast, asked pardon of God with tears and groans, thereby giving sensible marks of a heart broken with grief. He even repaired the evil he had done, as far as possible, by a law suspending executions for thirty days after the sentence was passed. Thus it was that an emperor was not ashamed to do a penance which private individuals would not have dared to undertake; and there was no day during his life afterwards in which the

remembrance of his sin was not present to his mind. Finally, at the end of eight months, St. Ambrose received him at the door of the cathedral of Milan, permitted him to assist at the Holy Sacrifice, and publicly gave him Holy Communion.

- D. GENEVAUX, *Hist. Choix.*, 283.

593. *I am no longer such a one.* . . . . -

When we have confessed our sins, done penance for them, and received absolution, there is still something more to be done, my very dear children! It is to correct ourselves. Accordingly, after a sincere conversion, we ought to be no longer the same; those who had been

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dissipated, volatile, idle, given to lying, ought to become serious, wise, laborious and truthful.

St. Ambrose, Archbishop of Milan, who lived in the fourth century, relates a somewhat curious fact in this connection. A young man, of Alexandria, I think, had had the misfortune to commit a great crime with a person of his own country. Ashamed of having given way to the temptation, and fearing to fall again if he remained at home, he undertook a long journey. I believe he came as far as Rome, went to confession there, and submitted to the severe penance imposed upon him. At last, when several years had passed, he returned to his own country, resolved to persevere in the good dispositions he then had.

Passing along the streets of Alexandria to go to the house of his parents, he was accosted by his former companion in guilt. She approaches and bids him good day. Our young pilgrim regards her with an astonished air, as though he did not recognize her. "Why?" said she, "do you not know me? I am *such-a-one*."

-- "That may be," said the young man, "but, as for me, I am no longer *such-a-one*." And he continued his way without saying a word more. There is precisely, dear friends, what we ought to say and do after our conversion; we should no longer be able to recognize ourselves.

- NOEL, *Cat. de Rodez*, II., 41.

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## CATHOLIC ANECDOTES.

# II. - ON CONTRITION.

594. *Imperfect Contrition of Antiochus.* -

The Holy Scripture furnishes us, my very dear friends, with a remarkable example of defective contrition, in the person of Antiochus Epiphanius, King of Syria. Enraged to see that Judas Maccabeus had so utterly defeated his armies, he quitted Persia, where he then was, and would put himself at the head of new troops.

He advanced then towards Judea, and swore to make Jerusalem a heap of ruins, and to bury all the Jews beneath it. But God watched over his people; as Antiochus was pursuing his journey with extraordinary rapidity, he fell from his chariot and bruised his whole body. That haughty prince, who fancied that he could command the very waves of the sea, felt that the hand of God had struck him. In fact, his wounds all festered and putrefied; his entrails were torn with excruciating pains; disgusting worms came forth from every part of his body, which had become, as it were, a mass of corruption. It was then that the impious prince began to repent of what he had done and projected against the people of God; he even allowed these words to escape him: "I see it is just to submit to God, and mortal man may not strive against Him who is immortal." He not only promised not to treat Judea as he had intended, but on the contrary, to treat it as one of his most favoured provinces, and even to furnish from his treasury the silver necessary for the sacrifices of the temple. He

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at length went so far as to promise that he would have himself instructed in the Jewish religion, and practise it with zeal and fidelity. All was of no avail; Antiochus died miserably before reaching the end of his journey.

"He asked mercy," says the Scripture, "but he was not to obtain mercy." And why so? Ah! dear friends, it

was because the contrition of Antiochus was not excited in him by supernatural motives. Observe that in all that he was only occupied with himself; he repents of his crimes because of the chastisements they drew down upon him; he proposes to do better for the future, but only in the hope of being cured. His contrition was defective; it was not such as to deserve pardon.

- *I. Maccabees*, Chapter VI. and *II. Maccabees*, Chapter IX.

595. *The Contrition and Penance of Ustazade the Apostate.* -

I cannot better make you acquainted with the fruits of a good confession than by the story I am going to relate. In the fourth century, Sapor, king of the Persians, having become a persecutor of the Christians, ordered that every priest in his dominions that would not renounce Jesus Christ should be beheaded. He sent for the Archbishop of Seleucia, St. Simeon, who had chief charge of the flock, and passed for the most zealous defender of Christianity. The king exhorted him to adore the Sun, making him the most magnificent promises if he obeyed, and threatening, in case of refusal, to put him to death and expel all the Christians from the kingdom. Simeon answered firmly: "I cannot adore the Sun, I should

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betray my religion." The prince, irritated, caused him to be put in prison, in the hope that the bad treatment he received there might, perhaps, induce him to change his mind. As they were conducting him thither, an old officer, named Ustazade, who was steward of the imperial palace, was deeply touched to see the holy bishop in that state. He prostrated himself before him through respect; but the Saint appeared offended by this testimony of respectful attachment, and he turned away his face so as not to see Ustazade.

And wherefore? Ah! it was that this officer had been formerly a Christian, and through weakness or cowardice had apostatized by worshipping the Sun, and thereby renouncing Christianity.

Ustazade understood St. Simeon's conduct; but he could not bear this reproach, which he had so well deserved, and he instantly burst into tears. To repair the crime of his apostasy, he threw off the white robe he wore and put on a black one, in order to manifest his repentance. Thus attired, he went and placed himself before the palace, and there, pouring forth tears and lamentations, he exclaimed: "Wretch that I am! What have I to expect from Jesus Christ, whom I have had the misfortune to renounce, if I am so sensible to the contempt, which Simeon, who is only His minister, shows for me because of my apostasy?" The king, hearing that his faithful eunuch was deeply afflicted, wanted to know the reason; he sent for him into the palace. "What disgrace has befallen you?" he said to him in a tone

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of the greatest mildness.

"Alas! I would rather that every disgrace possible had burst upon me, rather than that which is the cause of my grief! I weep that I am not dead, that I can still see that Sun which I have had the misfortune of adoring sooner than displease you. I deserve a double death, one for having betrayed Jesus Christ, my Adorable Saviour; the other, for having deceived you."

Ustazade then swore that he would never betray Him whom he recognized and adored as his God. At these words Sapor became furious, and swore to put all the Christians to death; yet through compassion for this old man, he neglected nothing to gain him over. "No," said this true penitent, "you shall not succeed; I will never be foolish enough to render to the creature the supreme worship which is due only to the Creator." The king, seeing his constancy, sentenced him to be beheaded. As he was led to execution, Ustazade sent for another officer of the palace, who was his friend, and besought him to go to Sapor and ask a favour for him. "Prince, in return for the fidelity with which he has served you for so many years, Ustazade prays you to grant that at the time when his sentence of death is being executed, a herald may proclaim that he was not so condemned in punishment of any crime, but only because he is a Christian, and refuses to betray his God." Sapor consented with pleasure to his steward's demand - he hoped thereby to intimidate the other Christians, when they saw that he did not even spare an old

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man who had served him long and well. There, dear friends, is what may be called a sincere contrition, accompanied by a firm purpose.

- LASSAUSSE, *Explic. du Cat. de L'Empire*, 572.

596. *Penance Imposed on a Truly Contrite Sinner.* -

It is related that a great sinner went to confession to the venerable Pierre de Corbeil, Archbishop of Sens, who lived, I think, in the fifteenth century. He made a sincere confession of all the crimes he had committed, and he did so sighing and weeping, asking with humility if God would really forgive him his sins. The prelate answered him: "Doubt it not, my son, provided you are sincerely resolved to do penance." "What?" cried this contrite and humble sinner, "will God, whom I have so grievously offended, be satisfied with that? Ah! impose on me whatever you will, I am ready to do it! But how can you ever impose a penance upon me long enough, severe enough, to equal the heinousness of my crimes?" The holy prelate, himself shedding tears of compassion and of joy on meeting a sinner so well disposed, said to him: "Your penance shall be only for seven years." - "Father!" cried the sinner, "my penance only for seven years! What! so small a thing for such great crimes, which I could not expiate in the whole course of the longest life!" - "It shall be less still, my dear child," said the Archbishop, more and more softened, "for I oblige you only to fast three days on bread and water." - "Ah! Father," cried the penitent, striking his breast very hard, "do not destroy me, I

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beseech you; I am at your feet, and I implore a mercy which I cannot too dearly purchase. Proportion, as far as possible, my penance to my iniquity, spare not my weakness; I am ready to do and undertake all, to obtain a pardon of which I am unworthy" The venerable confessor, inspired by God, and filled with admiration for the workings of grace, then told him: "Be of good heart, my son, I order you only to say the Lord's Prayer once, and I have every reason to believe that all your sins shall be forgiven you." At these words the penitent, whose heart was broken with grief, utters a loud cry, expressing at once his astonishment and his gratitude towards the God of mercy, and immediately he falls at the feet of the holy Archbishop, expiring thus with grief for having offended God, and going, perhaps, to heaven without even passing through the flames of purgatory. Magnificent example of perfect contrition!

- GUILLOIS, *Nouv. Explic. du Cat.*, 390.

597. *Method of Exciting Oneself to Contrition.* -

Contrition is so indispensable, dear friends, that we should neglect nothing to excite ourselves to it. Here is an excellent method to succeed therein. Mgr. de la Mothe d'Orleans, Bishop of Amiens, confessed every eight days. In his preparation for confession he made three stations: the first in hell, the second in heaven the third on Calvary. He first descended in thought into the place of torments, and saw there that spot he believed he had merited in the midst of devouring and everlasting flames, in company with

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devils and damned souls. He thanked the Lord for not having cast him into it, and besought him to still have mercy on him, granting him the graces necessary to preserve him from it. He then ascended to the regions of glory, amid the blessed. There, he groaned in spirit over the sins whereby he had closed its gates against him; he beseeched the Lord to open them, and fervently invoked the Saints.

He then went up in thought to Calvary, and considering attentively and lovingly his crucified Saviour, he said to himself:

"And there is my work! I am the cause of the pains and sorrows Jesus Christ endured; I helped, by my sins, to cover with wounds the body of a Man-God, to crucify Him, to put Him to death!

"O Jesus! what harm have You done me? How, could I treat You so, You who loved me to excess, You whom I ought to love with an infinite love, if I could love You infinitely? It is because You are infinitely amiable that I love You, and repent of having offended You."

You will admit, dear friends, that this method would be quite proper to produce good sentiments in our soul at the moment of confession.

- GUILLOIS, *Nouv. Explic. du Cat.*, 388.

598. *Mercy for Every Sin.* -

However numerous our sins may be, children, it is not they that will destroy us, but the want of contrition and confidence in God. Would you have a proof of this? Listen. A woman who was a great sinner, crossing a church one day to shorten her way, saw a great number of persons crowding in, and appearing to expect something

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extraordinary. Curious to know what was going on, she takes her place with the others ; and, the crowd increasing, she soon found herself so surrounded that it was impossible to think of retiring. Some time after, a venerable missionary ascended the pulpit, and preached oil the goodness of God to sinners. Amongst others, he several times repeated these words:

"My brethren, there is mercy for every sin, provided the sinner repents." This woman, who had heard all very attentively, fixed her mind particularly on these words, which had struck her. As soon as the discourse was finished, she made her way through the crowd, and, approaching the preacher just as he went down from the pulpit, she pulled him by the sleeve, and said with simplicity:

"Is it really true, father, that there is mercy for every sin?"

-- "Nothing is more certain, madam! God forgives all sinners if they only repent."

-- "But," said the woman again, "there are all sorts of sinners; does God forgive all without distinction?"

-- "Yes, certainly; provided they detest their sins, God forgives them all without distinction."

-- "Would He pardon me who for fifteen years have committed the greatest crimes?"

- "Undoubtedly," answered the missionary. "He will pardon your sins if you only detest, and cease to commit them."

-- "If that be so, father, I pray you tell me at what hour you will hear my confession."

-- "I can hear you immediately, madam; prepare yourself, and I will be back in a moment." The missionary points out his confessional, and returns some time

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after to hear her. Before retiring, she said to her confessor:

"Father, I cannot return to my dwelling without exposing myself to the danger of falling again into sin; could you not procure me a shelter for the night?" The missionary having explained to her that he could not do it without great difficulty, but would most definitely search out such accommodation in the morning, this woman generously resolved to remain in the church all night, spending her time in an all-night prayer vigil of repentance and thanksgiving. Next morning, when the doors were opened, she was found lifeless in a chapel dedicated to the Blessed Virgin; she was kneeling, with her face prostrate on the ground, and the pavement was seen wet with the tears she had shed; she had wept her sins so bitterly that she had died of grief. The missionary being apprised of what had happened, went to the place, recognized her for the person whose confession he had heard on the previous night, and admired the greatness of God's mercy. The circumstance furnished him with a theme for a fine and useful discourse; let it be for us, dear friends, an additional motive to excite ourselves to contrition for our faults, and never to lose confidence.

- NOEL, *Cat. de Rodez*, III., 237.

599. *The Fears of a Servant.* -

A servant, returning from catechism, was questioned by his master, who was a good Christian, on what he had learned.

"Alas! sir," said he sighing, "I have learned that I am damned."

- "And why so, Stephen?" asks his master.

"Because, sir, the priest says that one must be sorrier for their sins than for the death of their father, and I know that I felt more sorrow when my

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father died than I ever did for my sins."

The master told him that he must have misunderstood what was said.

He explained to him the doctrine of the Church on the subject of contrition, saying:

"You see, sorrow for sin is of a kind and of a nature very different from the sorrow one feels on losing their father. The first is a hatred and detestation of evil committed; the second is an effect of the natural tenderness which exists in the heart of children towards their parents. If you hate, and detest sin, if you are resolved rather to die than commit it anew, if you have these sentiments in your heart, be sure you have the necessary sorrow, you have a true contrition."

At these words the good servant began to breathe again; he sincerely thanked his master for having enlightened him, and explained his error to him, an error that might have ended by throwing him into despair. And yourselves, dear friends, try to penetrate yourselves with the conditions and marks of a true contrition, and excite yourselves thereto the best you can.

- GUILLOIS, *Nouv. Explic. du Cat.*, p. 391.

600. *A Zouave Soldier Preparing a Comrade for Death.* -

When one cannot confess, dear friends, they cannot obtain full pardon of their sins, (I am talking of mortal sins, of course,) except by an act of perfect contrition. The military history of France contains fine examples of this. I am somewhat of the opinion of that Zouave who said to an army chaplain:

"See, Father, the fears of the impious and unbelieving, 'it is good to live, but it is the devil to die,' they say.

"Well! it would be necessary then to ask pardon of God." He spoke well when he urged everyone to

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express to Him who is our Creator and Redeemer, all one's regret; it would be necessary, in a word, to do what a French Zouave officer wrote in military style on the death of one of his friends. It was about the year 1840. He addresses the sister of the deceased and tells her:

"Your brother had been grievously wounded. On reaching the ambulance, he told me he wanted a priest to hear his confession. I answered him (excuse the terms):

'My friend, you seem to mistake the age. We are no longer in the time of the Crusades, nor under the reign of St. Louis; we are under the reign of Bugeaud.'

- 'No matter,' said he, 'I was brought up a Christian, and I want to die a Christian.' I assure you I sent everywhere in search of a priest, but there was not one in the camp. Your brother appeared much afflicted, and his faith impressed me strongly.

"Then I said to him: 'My friend, God is good, He sees your good will. Express to Him your regret, ask His pardon, and I am sure He will forgive you any and all of your sins.' He did so, and died in the most edifying manner. I give you all these particulars because I know you are devout, and they will give you pleasure."

It is a little dry, as you see, dear friends, but it bears the pleasing stamp of sincerity, candour and faith. You see there is an occasion when perfect contrition is strictly necessary to obtain pardon of one's sins.

- MULLOIS, *Mois de Marie de tout le Monde*, p. 65.