

## **Renewal and the Penitential Life**

Reverend Monsignor Jeffrey A. Ingham

Wherever we may look for solutions to the present tension and confusion, we must realize that the solution will begin with the Eucharist, return to the Eucharist, and be formed by the Eucharist. Whatever secular processes may be deemed necessary, the problem is above all a spiritual problem and must be dealt with as such. Archbishop Cordileone put it very well: “Without prayer, penance and adoration for the horrendous sins rampant in our Church for many years now, any efforts in the temporal order will be meaningless.” But where to begin?

In the past fifty years or more there have been numerous commentaries and reflections on what has been the cause of a general weakening and breakdown of faith in general and of the spiritual life in particular. There are of course those who would see only an unending progress toward some unknown point, but this would be to miss the self-evident. There has been a growing experience of insecurity and confusion that seems to elude definition.

Many elements have been suggested and with good reason; in particular the trivializing of the Liturgy and the emptiness of catechetical instruction. Still, there are some other underlying causes that would seem to go deeply into the very heart of the Church’s life. One of these, and one that is essential for an understanding and living of the Gospel is the weakening and even rejection of the penitential life. We have lost the spirit of penance that defines a follower of Jesus Christ. This is partly due to a decline in emphasis on the necessity of penance, as well as a loss of a sense of sin and sometimes even a denial of sin itself. As a result of this, penance has often become so subjective that it is sometimes little more than a form of ascetic consolation. This is not only foreign to the mind of the Church, but also psychologically and emotionally unhealthy. Repentance and reparation are very healthy responses to sin, as well as being a source of hope and freedom.

In some ways this has resulted in the perfect storm. It began in the mid-sixties when just as the world was entering an epoch of immorality and amorality such as the Western world hadn’t seen in centuries, there was a somewhat sudden and seemingly intentional diminishment of penance and the penitential spirit. To put it another way: just as the world was experiencing a greater need for penance, the reality of penance was being either rejected, ignored, or marginalized. In fact, at times there seemed to be an actual fear of penance. The “me generation,” especially as experienced within the Church, didn’t seem to want anything beyond itself and couldn’t tolerate its self-esteem to be diminished. The visible (and invisible) effects of this on the celebration of the Eucharist and consequent reverence for the Eucharist have been not only negative, but destructive.

This became most evident in religious life in general and the great penitential orders in particular. A great many reasons were given for this: “a more balanced asceticism” on the one hand, and “a less severe asceticism” on the other. To suggest that a religious community was

being unfaithful to the charism of its founder, or that the Church was being weakened as a result might bring on a charge of rigorism and consequent Jansenism. In fact, the word “Jansenism” became a mantra that was meant to immediately silence any argument to the contrary. On one occasion I remember hearing then Cardinal Ratzinger referred to as a Jansenist. As a result, Our Lord’s command to be perfect was replaced with an aspiration to an elevated mediocrity. On another occasion, while visiting an abbey I was told by one of the monks that although the order had been thought of in the past as being penitential and contemplative, it had been explained to them that they were really contemplative, but not penitential. It must have been an easy sell; although how one can be one without the other is somewhat mystifying. While penance is part of reparation for sin, it is above all an emptying of self to allow for an openness to God. This is essential for all prayer, but particularly for contemplative prayer; and one might say that without penance the contemplative life also will become little more than “ascetic consolation.”

One of the symptoms of this decline in the penitential spirit (albeit seemingly insignificant) was the decline in the praying of the seven penitential psalms. These psalms had come down to us through the centuries and had played an important role in the spiritual and ascetical life of the Church. They were used in many different rites of the Church from the penances given after the reception of minor orders to the blessing of an abbot. They were in every edition of the Breviary and were often prayed in conjunction with the Litany of the Saints. Whenever a timeless element of the Church’s prayer life is lost or diminished, the Church is weakened.

Now there are those who would suggest that my concerns betray a latent gnosticism. Some would even say that I have failed to appreciate the role that the beauty of creation and the pleasures play in our lives and in our relationship to God. On the contrary, without penance these things cease to allow us to see the glory of God in them and become the focus of our attention. They become ends in themselves and their integrity is compromised. While all the saints understood this, St. Augustine was more than emphatic about the importance of realizing it.

Having said this, it is essential to distinguish between the forms that the penitential life will take in individual lives and in different communities. Obviously, the lives of the desert fathers are “more often to be admired than imitated.” The role and the types of penance in each life will be determined by many factors. State in life, family needs, health and professional responsibilities are but to name a few. Clergy and religious and their respective communities will have to deal with this matter in different ways, but deal with it we must if the Church is going to experience the renewal and the revitalization that is essential for her future and in particular for her mission of evangelization.