

Continual Conversion and Penance

Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the Church. ~ Colossians 1:24

JESUS CALLS EVERY PERSON to turn away from sin and to turn towards him — that is, to convert. This conversion requires not only change in one's actions but also a conversion of heart, a radical change of being. In the conversion of heart, one changes from being "dead to sin" to "alive ... in Christ Jesus" (Rom 6:11), from a child of wrath (see Eph 2:3) to a child of God (see Gal 4:5-7).

We cannot change (convert) our own hearts, and so conversion is first a work of God, the one who "will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live" (Dt 30:6). God "circumcises our hearts" in Baptism, when we are cleansed from sin and made children of God, "fellow heirs with Christ" (Rom 8:17), and "partakers of the divine nature" (2 Pt 1:4). God gives to each person the grace for conversion, to choose either to accept or reject. By a response of faith, the person accepts this gift of conversion, and by doing penance, cooperates with this grace.

Penance is any act which assists the Christian to turn away from sin and toward Jesus. Whenever we sincerely do penance, we cooperate with the grace of conversion. We will rejoice in our sufferings for the sake of Christ and experience a willingness to complete in our own bodies "what is lacking in Christ's afflictions" (Col 1:24; see also Phil 3:8). Our penance thus expresses an interior conversion.

Forms and Examples of Penance

Scripture suggests three forms of penance: fasting, prayer, and almsgiving (see Tb 12:8, Mt 6:1-18). Fasting cooperates with the grace of conversion in one's individual life, prayer cooperates with the grace of conversion in one's life with God, and almsgiving cooperates with the grace of conversion in one's life with others. Tradi-

tional fasting means abstaining from food for a given period of time to draw closer to God. Some people fast on bread and water alone as a way of teaching that Christ alone is the soul's only real nourishment. Almsgiving means giving money (or food, clothing, etc.) to the poor. The Church teaches that we must recognize Christ in the poorest of the poor. These are his brothers and sisters; as members of his Body, we must care for them. Furthermore, the practice of penance in one form affects the other two. For example, if we pray with true repentance, we will desire to change our way of life and will change the way we treat others.

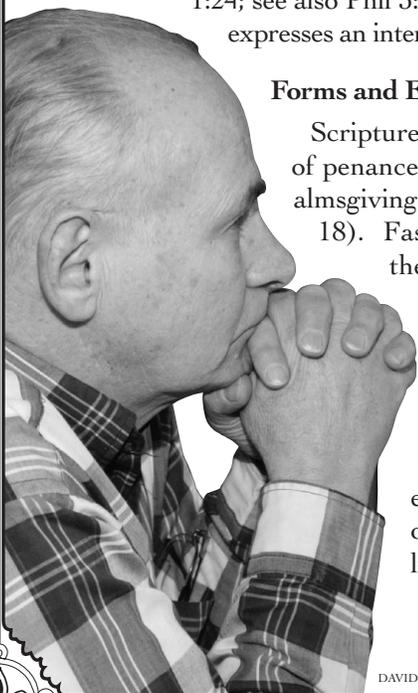
Because of ever-present human weakness and sin, continual conversion is necessary. Someone who truly desires to cooperate with God's grace need only utter a prayer like "How can I love you more, Lord Jesus?" and many ideas will surely come to mind. Scripture teaches that crying tears of repentance (see Lk 7:37-48), "love for one another" (1 Pt 4:8), and "bring[ing] back a sinner from the error of his way" (Jas 5:20) each "covers a multitude of sins" (1 Pt 4:8; see also Jas 5:20). Other ways to accomplish conversion are receiving the Eucharist, reading Scripture, praying the Rosary or any other devotion, worshiping Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, praying the Liturgy of the Hours, examining one's conscience, caring for the poor, giving money and time to those in need, seeking and following spiritual direction, visiting the lonely, practicing self-denial, and patient acceptance of suffering and persecution.

Requirements to do Penance

The penance assigned by the priest in the sacrament of Reconciliation is how the penitent is asked to make satisfaction for the sins they have just confessed and of which they have been forgiven. The baptized are also obliged to observe the days of abstinence and fasting during Lent. Additional penances should be done during those liturgical seasons and days designated for penitential practices — the forty days of Lent, Holy Week, Advent, and every Friday — since these are times when the Church intensely works together as the family of God in continuing conversion.

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DAVID CHARLES PHOTOGRAPHY