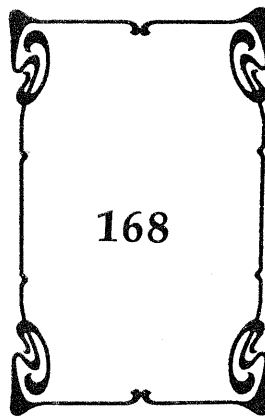


# Penance



FEDERICO SUAREZ

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This booklet is a translation by Michael Adams of a chapter from *La Paz os Dejo* (*Peace I Leave You*) by Fr. Federico Suarez. Fr. Suarez, a professor of history at the University of Navarre, is the author of many books of spirituality. Those available in English are *Mary of Nazareth*, *Joseph of Nazareth*, *About Being a Priest*, and *The Narrow Gate*.

"YOU WILL ALL likewise perish" (Lk 13:15). When we read these words or hear them quoted on their own, our immediate reaction is one of irritation. They instinctively turn us off. They have a threatening tone about them; they ring of intolerance, negativism, rigorism; we don't even want to explore what they mean; we feel like shutting them out. They remind us of times gone by, when we had to fend off ideas like condemnation, hell, the terrible judgment following on death, fear of eternity—everything which people tend to think no longer applies but which, nevertheless is absolutely certain and real even if we don't

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want to hear of it, even if we reject it as an affront to human dignity.

Yet these words, which we are going to think about now, were spoken by Jesus Christ, and they are there in the Gospel for everyone to read. Of course, they are not as roughly presented as I have given them. It is dangerous to take a phrase out of context: that usually makes for misunderstanding; we can get not just its tone wrong, but its meaning as well.

The words in question come from a passage in St. Luke (13:1-5) and form a part of some teaching Jesus gave his disciples in connection with a recent event they had been telling him about:

*There were some present at that very time who told him of the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And he answered them. "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered thus? I tell you, No; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish. Or those eighteen upon whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, No; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish."*

So you can see that Jesus did say those words but the context in which he

said them takes away the roughness, the tone of ill humor and coldness, which you get if you hear them on their own. He was simply drawing their attention to something which would certainly happen, if they did not take steps to prevent it happening.

#### *Not an easy matter*

Even so, these words do not constitute a consoling piece of doctrine. They are not reassuring and joyful, like the parable of the prodigal son or the story of Mary Magdalen, for example. Rather, they belong to that other kind of teaching where Jesus tried hard to show us that salvation, getting to heaven, is not an easy matter: a person needs to work hard to achieve salvation; it calls for more than good will or an occasional good action done in the course of one's lifetime. It is not as if we were boy scouts who do their good deed every day and can go to bed happy that they have done what is required of them. It is something much more serious than that.

"Unless you repent, unless you do penance, you will all likewise perish." Does this mean that penance is *necessary* for salvation, necessary to avoid

perishing for all eternity? I can't see what else it can mean. Obviously, Jesus was not referring to physical death: everyone, whether they do penance or not, has to die, one way or another. But if the words refer to eternal death, then we must conclude that there is no salvation without penance.

It would not surprise me if you found this conclusion quite annoying—on the grounds that it means you have to comply with a condition as unnecessary as it is capricious, as annoying as it is arbitrary. But anyone who reacts in this way should dismiss this reaction: this ignorance of basic truths shows that he is the victim of consumer society propaganda, well on the way to losing his faith, a faith whose content is fading from his mind.

That's the way it is: the words of the Gospel do sound strange to those who we might describe as "the people of our time." The idea of penance does not make sense when the faith is twisted to suit the consumer. Penance implies some connection with sin, with an offence against God which needs to be atoned for. But how can you have atonement when you deny that any offence has been committed? When God is

understood in a vague deistic sort of way, or when the notion of personal sin is replaced by the notion of social sins which dilute responsibility to the point of doing away with it, what kind of meaning can sin have? Sin becomes an empty, meaningless word.

#### *The first step*

The first step a person must take if he or she is to realize that penance does make sense is to recognize that he is a sinner. Everyone is a sinner; that is to say, he is in debt to God. I don't say this lightly: look what St. John says: "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us." This means that penance becomes a matter of justice: a debtor is under an obligation to pay what he owes. Here we meet the first difficulty towards understanding that penance is necessary, for people's general attitude these days—more influenced by human theories than by the truths of revelation—is not inclined to see man as a debtor who must pay up.

The root of penance lies in repentance, contrition, being grieved at the harm we have done an innocent person, at the wound we have opened by offending someone who has a right to our respect, and friendship, and love. This grief (*me poenitet* is the Latin expression: I am weighed down) is what leads us to recognize our fault, to seek forgiveness, and, indeed, to place ourselves at the disposition of the offended party and do what we can to repair the harm we have done. When sorrow is sincere, the sinner feels a genuine need to demonstrate with deeds that he really wants to wipe out his wrong doing. He really wants to atone to the person he has offended. This is why, in the real situation acts of penance have a direct connection with our sense of sorrow for sin committed.

#### *What is sin?*

So: what is sin? I am afraid that really it is not a subject that greatly interests people nowadays unless it is approached in a modern way, in keeping with the degree of "maturity" "mankind" has achieved. There are all sorts of "modern" approaches to sin. For example, mature modern man is not only interes-

ted in but very open to theories which suggest that sin is simply a guilt complex—which can easily be cured by a good psychoanalyst; he also likes theories which say that sin is just a taboo, which you have to free yourself from because it cramps your personality and traps you in a thicket of bourgeois conventionalism; or theories which state that sin is an unimportant accident, the result of psychological causes—not something to worry about, because no one can be blamed for sinning. Perhaps the theory people like the most is that which sees sin only in terms of "social sin", community sin: this exonerates the individual from all personal responsibility without having to go so far as to deny the very existence of sin.

These theories I mention are actually going the rounds and are making inroads in the minds of many Christians—which shows that we have done very little to take issue with the false teaching spread by pseudo-theologians and pseudo-scientists. (God alone knows *why* they have developed these theories); nor have we done much about making sure we, for our part, have a good grasp of Christian doctrine.

### *The essence of sin*

However, I must remind you that sin is, essentially and above all, an offence against God. It is man rebelling against his Creator, rupturing his link with God. It amounts to despising Christ's sufferings and the reason he underwent them. Compared with all that, other dimensions of sin do not amount to much—not even the harm sin does our neighbor: because that arises out of the fact that a neighbor is one of God's creatures, made in his image and likeness; it is God whom we are hurting when we hurt our neighbor (if we can put it that way). Without God, who created him and keeps him in existence, there would be no neighbor, no man, no universe. There would be nothing.

Through Adam's enormous sin, mankind rejected God; and by the time people realized the catastrophe they had drawn down on themselves it was too late. But God is our Father, a Father whose love for his children ("God is love" according to St. John's definition) led him to have his only begotten Son take on human nature in the womb of the Virgin Mary and die nailed to a cross to atone for our sins (for all sins, from

Adam's to the last sin of the last man on earth), in payment of a debt which no man, nor mankind as a whole, had any way of paying. Christ's sacrifice paid the entire sum of that debt.

But does man, everyman, accept this ransom paid on his behalf? It can happen that he refuses to accept that he has any debt to pay—in which case he voluntarily excludes himself from redemption.

This seems to be the attitude of those who say there is no such thing as sin, or who make sin out to be something so banal and insignificant that redemption (the crucifixion of the Son of God!) becomes meaningless, and any act of atonement, something silly and useless. Whereas, man's recognition that he is a sinner, his acceptance of Christ's payment of his debt, expresses itself in a gesture of goodwill—penance.

### *An easy-going time*

We live in a very easy-going time. True, there is a lot of harshness and violence, but it is harshness and violence done to others—the cruelty typical of the weak. Nowhere can we find that violence which everyone should do to himself, to keep his instincts un-

der control, to dominate his will and make it serve God, make it do what it ought to do, irrespective of whether or not that is comfortable or pleasant. The softness typical of our society expresses itself in the way we pamper our body, in our apparently insatiable search for well-being; in flight from all forms of discomfort; in our frantic pursuit of pleasure, of everything that indulges our sense. All of that elaborate orchestration having to do with sex, from childhood onwards (children must be given sexual education as early as possible), all of that industry devoted to improving standards of living, comfort, plenty (including plenty of contraceptives): all this is geared to making man forget that life is really nothing more than "a bad night in a bad inn" as St. Teresa put it. Yet, in the end we all have to die, and all pleasure disappears, leaving only a gaping void.

Today, the classical forms of penance (fasting, hairshirts, the discipline, vigils) which used to be so much in favor, seem to most Christians to be senseless: very little seems to be said about doing penance for one's sins; the emphasis, rather, is on improving living standards to give people access to a more dig-

nified and more comfortable life. The kind of person created by the "mature" world of today (a world that "sins insolently and abhors atonement for sin," as Paul VI put it) is capable of making huge sacrifices in the name of science, technology, power, wealth and even sport; but what about God, who was crucified for our sins? "How afraid people are of atonement! If all that they do for appearance sake, to please the world, were done with a purified intention for God... what saints many would be!" (J. Escriva, *The Way*, 215).

#### *Wasted penance*

It is true. Many people do for nothing at all what, if done in a spirit of expiation, could bring peace to their souls and maybe make saints of them. Just to be on the "cutting edge" of fads and fashions people will go to extremes of dress and hairstyles. While devout Jews of St. Paul's day sometimes shaved their heads in connection with a vow, teenagers today may do it to set off their punk "spiked Mohawk" hairdo. The hippies of the seventies often dressed in rags—just like a repentant medieval noble making up to God for his years of slavery to worldly pleasures by wear-

ing sackcloth. But the hippies did it in the name of "freedom" and nonconformity. If someone, voluntarily and out of love for Christ crucified, imposed on himself the penance of going out in the early morning on a cold, miserable day to climb a mountain in the wind and rain, people would probably laugh at him or think he was mad. But they think it is quite all right for someone to go out hunting in the same conditions.

People today can see no point in striving to keep their instincts under control: but if a woman starves herself to keep in shape or a man past forty jogs to keep fit, that meets with their entire approval. A desire to keep trim or fear of getting a heart attack have more influence on a Christian nowadays than eagerness to get to heaven or fear of hell. Just look at the training astronauts undergo. If you read the books they have written you can check it out: the fathers of the desert were schoolboys compared with them. Take the young Prague student who set fire to himself to protest against the Russian invasion of his country: everyone applauded him. People are quite ready to accept someone committing suicide to protest against injustice: but they cannot see

any sense in a man doing penance for his sins. If Christians took a leaf out of the book of the athlete who goes to enormous pains to knock a second off his record (what does it matter, really?) and did as much to atone to God for the sins they have committed, I think there would be a lot more sanctity in the world.

No: man in the technological era just does not admit that he has anything to atone for, any debt to repay to God. And yet ...

If you have read Bernanos, you may have been surprised by the terrible sense of sin that exists in the society, in the people who make up the society which he describes. He so accurately conveys the sinister atmosphere of sin in the environment—you can almost smell it: it stains everything, it seems to contaminate even the air people breathe. Bernanos was writing at a time when external appearances were given great importance (a hypocritical society) and righteous types were all very conscious of their respectability; convention was their god. We don't find that sort of thing nowadays; there are no righteous types around. Today all conventions have been torn down and

we don't hide our vices under a cloak of respectability (we are so open and honest!). No. We have decided that vice is respectable and there is no reason to hide it. It is not a sin: it is something natural (even vices which are against nature); so, instead of hiding our vices we parade them which means that we are more hypocritical than the righteous types of a hypocritical society. They lied to other people by hiding their sins, but they did not lie to themselves, or think other people were half-wits; so, they still lived in a real world, still called a spade a spade. Today, the people of our mature society lie to themselves and to other people as well. The righteous types of a previous era were whitened sepulchres, but they did not succeed in deceiving anyone, because whitened though they were they did not hide the fact that they were sepulchres. Today's sepulchres are still whitened, but they pretend they are not sepulchres but living monuments erected in the name of freedom and progress, and as such they demand to be accepted. And they think that other people are fools and don't see through them. And sometimes they are quite right.

### *Today's Pharisees*

Today's Pharisees do not admit sin, they will not accept that they are sinners. They have nothing in common with the publican in the Gospel, who was such a sinner that he did not even dare enter the temple. He stayed at the entrance, half hidden by a pillar in case anyone should think he was profaning the temple by his presence, and not daring to raise his head. He stayed there, head bent, beating his breast, saying over and over again, "Lord have mercy on me, I am a sinner."

Not so the Pharisee. He stood up for all to see, his head high (the dignity of man!), pleased with himself, giving thanks that he was not a sinner. He paid his tithes, he was not an adulterer, nor a thief—not like that despicable publican. Today's Pharisee is not a sinner either, because what he does is not sin: he has none of those guilt complexes, he has shed them all; he has freed himself of conventions and taboos, and even of any trace of objective moral standards. He is liberated. But we should not make him the equal of the Pharisee in the Gospel, even though he too holds his head high. The Pharisee in the Gospel still gave thanks to God.

As St. Teresa used to say, when she wandered off and lost the thread of what she was writing, "I've gone off the path again!" What I meant to say was that sin is a fact: it is the worst, the most abominable of all facts; it is pure evil, but it is absolutely real. And, secondly, you and I and everyone else are sinners: we are people born in sin, and forever in God's debt; who have of our own accord offended God through personal sins: people, therefore, who have no right to look at God with our head held high, because our "human dignity" (which comes from our being the image and likeness of God, and from being redeemed by the blood of Christ) is something we have trampled on by behaving in a manner that is beneath man's dignity.

#### *The Church's view*

Are you conscious of this fact? The Church certainly is. The Church realizes she is the Mystical Body of Christ, and that we are members of that Body. If Christ, the Head, suffered on account of our sins, it is only right that we, members of his Body, should be in solidarity with him: if the innocent paid for the guilty, surely the guilty have to do

something themselves.

The Church, I repeat, has always known that penance was necessary for salvation. And since she knows her own responsibility and is well aware of our softness, she laid down that we should all do a minimum of penance, in the form of fast and abstinence. Not a great deal, just a minimum. This law was in force for centuries. Now she has decided to leave it to the generosity of the faithful and to their love of God to decide what acts of penance to do, leaving us free to substitute other good deeds instead of fast and abstinence. She has thrown the ball into our court, taken away the crutches we were using. This new situation where the onus of doing penance lies squarely on our shoulders, can help us to see whether what we did in the past was due to our desire to make reparation for our sins, to our sorrow for having offended God, to our compassion for Christ crucified on our behalf, or was simply the residue of a long established custom which we found trite and at times even meaningless. Now we can indeed know whether as Catholics we are adults or still children.

### *The hard truth*

I don't want to scandalize you, yet I cannot treat you like people who cannot be told the hard truth. The mystery of iniquity, sin, is something very real and very serious. So much so, that if one single sin could prevent a war (with all the suffering that means for innocent parties), if one single sin could wipe out hunger and thirst, and pain, and physical death, it still would not be licit to commit it. Sin is worse than all the evils it gives rise to. And hunger and thirst and pains, war and death and suffering, are just some of the results of the first sin man committed—results which are multiplied over and over again by all the sins which followed it. And today people seem to be bent on multiplying them, to judge from how eager some are to convince us that sin is a mere bagatelle—yet a highly pleasant and necessary course to take to attain "personal fulfillment."

There is a great mystery in this terrible impoverishment which sin creates wherever it is to be found and the world today has become a huge bed of worms. Somewhere, there must be some saints, with a lot of love of God, and consumed

with sorrow at the affronts which Christ is bearing with infinite patience: otherwise the world would just collapse. And there is also a culpable empty-headedness (or should we say ignorance?) in the banal and unconcerned attitude we men adopt towards sin. For very many Catholics sin is just an accident which seems to have very little impact on their lives. There are people who habitually go around dead on the inside, in a state of condemnation and in the devil's power and who do nothing to change. Perhaps because they are simply, dead.

### *No flattery*

I don't want to deceive you, which is what some people seem intent on doing. If we do not do penance, if we do not really repent and turn to God, we will all likewise perish. Penance is not a luxury; it is a necessity (presuming, of course, that we want to live eternally with Christ. If that is not what we want, if we want something else, then obviously we should do other things than penance.) I do realize that this whole business of penance is not very nice: but it's not meant to be. Not even Jesus tried to win us over by smiles, concessions and condescension. He spoke

by his actions; he told us truths, whether pleasant or not. What he did not do was buy us by flattery—by useless, stupid lies. No, he did what none of those false prophets do who swarm all over the place preaching that what God forbids is good and that what he commands is bad for us: he gave his life to pay our debts.

And if it is true that you young people have an instinct for justice, if it is true that you have a great sensitivity for detecting injustice wherever it lies hidden, if the nice things the editorials say about you are true, how come you tolerate sin, which is the greatest injustice of all, given that it is an affront and an offence to God, to whom we owe our very existence? Why are you so tolerant, why do you cooperate in condemning Jesus Christ as if he were an imposter?

“Unless you repent you will all likewise perish” ... I think it is all very just. A person cannot go through life hating God and crucifying his Son, and on top of that feel that he is unjustly treated because he is not given eternal life on a plate. You cannot be intellectually indifferent to or actively despise Christ’s

passion and then claim that that very passion is your passport to heaven. You just cannot.