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THE MERCY OF GOD

by Pope John XXIII

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By
POPE JOHN XXIII

LONDON
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Foreword

by the Very Rev.
Monsignor Canon C. Collingwood

Pope John XXIII wrote these notes on his meditations while in retreat at the beginning of his sixtieth year, when he was Papal Representative in Turkey and Greece. He had entered retreat united in spirit with Pope Pius XII who was making his annual retreat in the Vatican at the same time.

When they were being written in November 1940, the Second World War was being waged fiercely in Europe and beyond.

Archbishop Roncalli (as Pope John then was) chose as the subject of his five-day retreat the penitential Psalm, the Miserere, basing his meditations on an exposition of the Psalm written by a Father Segneri about a century before.

In the words of *A Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture*, the Miserere is 'an act of contrition, confession and supplication uttered by a repentant sinner. According to the title he is David, who had committed adultery with Bethsabee. As satisfaction for his sin he promises to strive to lead sinners back to God, by preaching divine justice. Instead of a merely external sacrifice, he offers the tribute of a contrite and humble heart'.

Archbishop Roncalli wrote at the outset of his Spiritual Exercises: 'To understand the profound meaning of the Psalm I find it a great help to bear in mind the figure of the royal prophet himself and the circumstances of his repentance and grief. It is a king who has fallen; it is a king who rises again'.

The Mercy of God

I

'Have mercy on me, O God, according to thy great mercy.'

1. *The mourning of the nations.* This cry reaches my ears from every part of Europe and beyond. The murderous war which is being waged on the ground, on the seas and in the air is truly a vindication of divine justice because the sacred laws governing human society have been transgressed and violated. It has been asserted, and is still being asserted, that God is bound to preserve this or that country, or grant it invulnerability and final victory, because of the righteous people who live there or because of the good that they do. We forget that although in a certain sense God has made the nations, he has left the constitution of states to the free decisions of men. To all he has made clear the rules which govern human society: they are all to be found in the Gospel. But he has not given any guarantee of special and privileged assistance, except to the race of believers, that is, to Holy Church as such. And even his assistance to his Church, although it preserves her from final defeat, does not guarantee her immunity from trials and persecutions.

The law of life, alike for the souls of men and for nations, lays down principles of justice and universal harmony and the limits to be set to the use of wealth, enjoyments and worldly power. When this law is violated, terrible and merciless sanctions come automatically into action. No state can escape. To each its hour. War is one

of the most tremendous sanctions. It is willed not by God but by men, nations and states, through their representatives. Earthquakes, floods, famines and pestilences are applications of the blind laws of nature, blind because nature herself has neither intelligence nor freedom. War instead is desired by men, deliberately, in defiance of the most sacred laws. That is what makes it so evil. He who instigates war and foments it is always the 'Prince of this world', who has nothing to do with Christ, the 'Prince of peace'.

And while the war rages, the peoples can only turn to the Miserere and beg for the Lord's mercy, that it may outweigh his justice and with a great outpouring of grace bring the powerful men of this world to their senses and persuade them to make peace.

2. *The mourning of my own soul.* What is happening in the world on a grand scale is reproduced on a small scale in every man's soul, is reproduced in mine. Only the grace of God has prevented me from being eaten up with malice. There are certain sins which may be called typical: this sin of David's, the sins of St Peter and St Augustine. But what might I not have done myself, if the Lord's hand had not held me back? For small failings the most perfect saints underwent long and harsh penances. So many, even in our own times, have lived only to make atonement; and there are souls whose lives, even today, are one long expiation of their own sins, of the sins of the world. And I, in all ages of my life more or less a sinner, should I not spend my time mourning? Cardinal Federico's famous reply is still so eloquent and moving: 'I did not ask for praises, which make me tremble: what I know of myself is enough to confound me'.

Far from seeking consolation by comparing myself with others, I should make the Miserere for my own sins my most familiar prayer. The thought that I am a priest and

Bishop and therefore especially dedicated to the conversion of sinners and the remission of sins should add all the more anguish to my feelings of grief, sadness and tears, as St Ignatius says. What is the meaning of all these flagellations, or having oneself set on the bare ground, or on ashes, to die, if not the priestly soul's continual plea for mercy, and his constant longing to be a sacrificial victim for his own sins and the sins of the world?

3. *The great mercy.* It is not just ordinary mercy that is needed here. The burden of social and personal wickedness is so grave that an ordinary gesture of love does not suffice for forgiveness. So we invoke the great mercy. This is proportionate to the greatness of God. 'For according to his greatness, so also is his mercy' (Ecclus 2:23, *D*). It is well said that our sins are the seat of divine mercy. It is even better said that God's most beautiful name and title is this: mercy. This must inspire us with a great hope amidst our tears. 'Yet mercy triumphs over judgment'.¹ This seems too much to hope for. But it cannot be too much if the whole mystery of the Redemption hinges on this: the exercise of mercy is to be a portent of predestination and of salvation. 'Have mercy on me, O God, according to thy great mercy.'

II

'And according to the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my iniquity.'

The Lord is said to be 'merciful and gracious'.² His mercy is not simply a feeling of the heart; it is an abundance of gifts.

¹Jas 2:13 (*RSV*).

²Cf. Ps 111 (110):4; 112 (111):4.

When we consider how many graces are poured into the sinner's soul along with God's forgiveness, we feel ashamed. These are: the loving remission of our offence; the new infusion of sanctifying grace, given as to a friend, as to a son; the reintegration of the gifts, habits and virtues associated with the grace; the restitution of our right to heaven; the restoration of the merits we had earned before our sin; the increase of grace which this forgiveness adds to former graces; the increase of gifts which grow in proportion to the growth of grace just as the rays of the sun increase as it rises, and the rivulets are wider as the fountain overflows.

III

'Wash me yet more from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin': holy confession.

Three verbs: to blot out, to wash and to cleanse, in this order. First the iniquity must be blotted out, then well washed, that is, every slightest attachment to it is removed; finally the cleansing, which means conceiving an implacable hatred for sin and doing things which are contrary to it, that is making acts of humility, meekness, mortification, etc., according to the diversity of the sins. These three operations follow one another but to God alone belongs the first. To God, in co-operation with the soul, the second and the third: the washing and the cleansing. Let us, poor sinners, do our duty: repent and with the Lord's help, wash and cleanse ourselves. We are sure that the Lord will do the first, the blotting out; this is prompt and immediate. And so we must believe it to be, without doubts or hesitations. 'I believe in the forgiveness of sins.' The two processes which depend on our co-operation need time, progress, effort. Therefore we say: 'Wash me yet more ... and cleanse me'.

This mysterious process of our purification is perfectly accomplished in holy confession, through the intervention of the blood of Christ which washes and cleanses us. The power of the divine blood, applied to the soul, acts progressively, from one confession to another. 'Yet more' and ever more. Hence the importance of confession in itself, with the words of absolution, and of the custom of frequent confession for persons of a spiritual profession, such as priests and Bishops. How easy it is for mere routine to take the place of true devotion in our weekly confessions! Here is a good way of drawing the best out of this precious and divine exercise: to think of Christ who, according to St Paul, was created by God to be 'our wisdom, our righteousness, sanctification and redemption' (1 Cor 1:30, *RSV*).

So, when I confess, I must beg Jesus first of all to be my wisdom, helping me to make a calm, precise, detailed examination of my sins and of their gravity, so that I may feel sincere sorrow for them. Then, that he may be my justice, so that I may present myself to my confessor as to my judge and accuse myself sincerely and sorrowfully. May he be also my perfect sanctification when I bow my head to receive absolution from the hand of the priest, by whose gesture is restored or increased sanctifying grace. Finally, that he may be my redemption as I perform that meagre penance which is set me instead of the great penalty I deserve: a meagre penance indeed, but a rich atonement because it is united with the sacrament to the blood of Christ, which intercedes and atones and washes and cleanses, for me and with me.

This 'wash me yet more' must remain the sacred motto of my ordinary confessions. These confessions are the surest criterion by which to judge my spiritual progress.

IV

'For I know my iniquity, and my sin is ever before me.'

The advice of the ancient philosophers, 'Know thyself', was already a good foundation for an honest and worthy life. It served for the ordinary exercise of humility, which is the prime virtue of great men. For the Christian, for the ecclesiastic, the thought of being a sinner does not by any means signify that we must lose heart, but it must mean confident and habitual trust in the Lord Jesus who has redeemed and forgiven us; it means a keen sense of respect for our fellow men and for all men's souls and a safeguard against the danger of becoming proud of our achievements. If we stay in the cell of the penitent sinner, deep in our heart, it will be not only a refuge for the soul which has found its own true self, and with its true self calm in decision and action, but also a fire by which zeal for the souls of men is kept more brightly lit, with pure intentions and a mind free from preoccupations about success, which is extraneous to our apostolate.

David needed the shock of the prophet's voice saying: 'You are the man'.³ But afterwards his sin is always there, always before his eyes, an ever-present warning: 'My sin is always before me'.

Father Segneri wisely points out that it is not necessary to remember the exact form of every single sin, which would be neither profitable nor edifying, but it is well to bear in mind the memory of past failings as a warning, as an incitement to holy fear and zeal for souls. How often the thought of sins and sinners recurs in the liturgy! This is even more true of the Eastern than of the Latin liturgy; but it is well expressed in both, 'My sin is always before me', just as the sins of men were before Jesus in his

³2 Sam 12:7 (RSV).

agony in the garden of Gethsemane, as they were before Peter at the height of his authority as Supreme Pontiff, before Paul in the glory of his apostolate, and before Augustine in the splendour of his great learning and episcopal sanctity.

I pity those unhappy men who, instead of keeping their sin before them, hide it behind their backs! They will never be free from past or future sins.

V

'Against thee only have I sinned, and have done evil in thy sight; that thou mayst be justified in thy sentence and blameless in thy judgment.'

Sin is an offence against God, and for this alone a grave evil. The other considerations are all secondary in comparison with this: a wife raped and a husband killed are things of small account compared with an outraged God. This is what David understood and what we must understand too. How differently this world thinks! People are sorry, not for having offended the Lord, but because they have suffered disgrace, loss or misfortune.

The saints did not feel that way. 'I said, "O Lord, be merciful to me; heal my soul, for I have sinned against thee"' (Ps 40:5, D).

Another thought: 'I have done evil in thy sight'. Sin, even if directed against one's neighbour and against oneself, directly violates God's holy law. But it is graver because it is committed in God's sight. 'God sees me': our humble grandmothers used to work this motto into their samplers of rustic embroidery: it still hangs on the old walls of our houses and it contains a stern reminder which serves to give a character of decency to all our behaviour. What a profound truth this is of the omnipresence of God, of his searching glance which penetrates even the secret

recesses of our privacy. A whole treatise of ascetic doctrine could be written about this truth from which is derived the purest beauty of sanctified souls, as clear as crystal, as pure as well water, using no deceit with others or with themselves (for it happens sometimes that we are insincere even with ourselves, surely the height of folly!) even at the risk of seeming of little worth. 'The simplicity of the just man is derided.' What a fine passage this is from St Gregory the Great!

VI

'For, behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.'

This might seem to be proffered as an excuse, but is really a more explicit statement of his own helplessness. David is referring to the law of original sin, of which St Paul speaks and which theologians call 'natural infirmity', the law we feel in our body, in opposition to the law of the spirit, but he did not mention this in order to turn the question aside, or seek a pretext or a justification.

We must recognize that wickedness is in us because, although the temptation comes from without, the grace to resist it is entirely at our disposal and is stronger than the temptation. 'Devils? What devils?' Professor Tabarelli used to say when he was expanding to us the Treatise *De gratia* at the Apollinare, 'We are the devils. We are the ones responsible'. Of David's case, St Augustine wisely said: 'When the woman was far away, the man's desire was at hand. What he desired to see, and the cause of his sin, were elsewhere'.

Our knowledge of human frailty must be for us, physicians of souls, a reason for pitying, raising and encouraging others, not for excusing ourselves.

We have the grave responsibility of guarding the grace that is always offered us to hold nature in check. In our poor nature lie hidden perverse tendencies towards ambition, pride, greed, impatience, envy, avarice, sloth and impunity. These are within us, as Segneri says, as in a vast menagerie of wild beasts, bears, wolves, tigers, lions and leopards. They cannot hurt us so long as the portcullis is down and holds them back. It is as if they were not there: grace has shut them in and holds them down. But if the barrier is raised the wild beasts, following their own natural instincts, rush to sate their appetites! 'A Saviour, a wall and a rampart shall be set therein' (Is 26:1, *D*).⁴ If exterior and interior grace, the wall and the rampart, fall, what a disaster for a poor Christian, for a poor priest! 'For behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me'. Not our own good natural mothers, but the ancient sinful mother of mankind.

VII

'For, behold, thou hast loved truth: the uncertain hidden things of thy wisdom thou hast revealed to me.'

First of all the Psalmist wished to justify the Lord's words spoken to him by the prophet: 'that thou mayst be justified in thy sentence', and to exalt the triumph of his judgment: 'that thou mayst be blameless in thy judgment'.

Now he proclaims that his God is a lover of truth. In fact truth is in God as in its source and God is all truth; as Jesus, the divine Word, said himself: 'I am the truth'.⁵ A declaration of this sort would seem that of a madman had it not come from the lips of God made man. The Roman

⁴Cf. Lam 2:8.

⁵Cf. Jn 14:6.

governor was much puzzled by this declaration of Christ's and asked him: 'What is truth?'

The truth, says Father Segneri, is a transcendent virtue which enters into all well-ordered human affairs and, according to the diversity of these, assumes different names. In the schools it is called science, in speech veracity, in conduct frankness, in conversation sincerity, in actions righteousness, in business dealings honesty, in giving advice freedom from prejudice, in the keeping of promises loyalty, and in the courts of law it has the noble title of justice. This is the Lord's truth which 'abides for ever'.⁶

The love of truth. On the day of my episcopal consecration the Church gave me a particular mandate concerning it: 'Let him choose humility and truth and never forsake them for any flattery or threats. Let him not consider light to be darkness, or darkness light; let him not call evil good, or good evil. Let him learn from wise men and fools, so that he may profit from all'. I thank the Lord for having given me a natural inclination to tell the truth, always and in all circumstances and before everyone, in a pleasant manner and with courtesy, to be sure, but calmly and fearlessly. Certain small fibs of my childhood have left in my heart a horror of deceit and falsehood. Now, especially as I am growing old, I want to be particularly careful about this: to love the truth, God helping me! I have repeated this many times, swearing it on the Gospel.

The revelation of the uncertain and hidden things of divine wisdom comes by itself. The love of truth means perpetual childhood, fresh and joyful. And the Lord reveals his most sublime mysteries to children and conceals them from the learned and the so-called wise men of this world.

⁶Cf. 1 Jn 2:17.

VIII

'Sprinkle me with hyssop, and I shall be clean: wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.'

This refers to the Mosaic rite of the cleansing of lepers. They had to let themselves be sprinkled by the priest with a bunch of hyssop dipped in blood, and then wash themselves from head to foot in pure water.⁷ Here are foreshadowed the sins which defile the body and sully the soul. Hyssop is a plant of mean appearance but of great strength. It sprouts on rock and strikes roots in it. Oh how great is man's need of this cleansing! Isaiah was right when he saw Jesus as the great purifier: 'He shall sprinkle many nations (with hyssop)' (Is 52:15, *D*). In the metaphor David used we may see not only the reference associated with the Mosaic rite but also, and more significantly, the double cleansing reserved for the human race by means of the two sacraments of baptism and penance. He who cleanses us is our Redeemer himself. The altar of his sacrifice is humble, like hyssop, but his blood is powerful, sprinkled with divine generosity over the bodies and souls of believers for their purification. What a great gift this is, daily poured out all over the world, in the two sacraments of reconciliation and salvation! Through these this poor world is purified and rises again, whiter than snow.

I will make further use of this verse when I make my weekly confession: 'Sprinkle me, Lord, and I shall be cleansed'.

May the Lord cleanse me from my self-love which, as Segneri says, is attached to three things: to my will, which wants to go its own way; to my reputation, making me intolerant of scorn; to my own comfort, which is averse to suffering and encourages the wasteful use of time!

⁷Cf. Lev 14:1 ff.

I think too of the Sunday aspersions with holy water in the parish churches before Mass. 'Familiarity breeds contempt.' We must return to the mystical significance of these rites, and expound it to the faithful. How can we not fail to recall the coming of Christ as the 'High Priest of the good things to come' who 'through his own blood assures for us eternal redemption'⁸ and in this way purifies his faithful people?

IX

'To my hearing thou shalt give joy and gladness; and the bones that have been humbled shall rejoice.'

When we hear that we are forgiven: 'The Lord has taken away your sin',⁹ we are full of joy and gladness. We have felt this so often when after the absolution we rise from kneeling before our confessor, especially when we are in retreat or on some other more solemn occasions in our life. The joy is in our understanding, the gladness in our heart. This twofold sensation is expressed also in the renewed physical vigour and energy of our bodies: 'The bones that have been humbled shall rejoice'. There are some most moving references to this in the Bible: Isaiah tells us, 'Your heart shall thrill and rejoice' (Is 60: 5, *RSV*), and we read in Proverbs, 'a glad heart makes a cheerful countenance' (Prov 15: 13, *RSV*).

The mystery of spiritual joy, which is a characteristic of saintly souls, is seen here in all its beauty and charm. The Lord leaves us uncertain about our eternal salvation, but gives us signs which suffice to calm our souls and make us joyful.

'It is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God' (Rom 8: 16, *RSV*). I ask you:

⁸Cf. Heb 9: 11-12.

⁹2 Sam 12: 13. (*RSV*).

is this a small thing, to feel we are God's children? This confidence, which is often in our hearts without our being able to account for it, is the inexhaustible source of our joy, the most solid foundation of true piety, which consists in desiring everything that is full and loving service to the Lord. The essential is that this desire of ours should be prompt and effective. That it should be a source of enjoyment also, that is, of tender affection, sweetness, delight and joy - this is also important, but accidental and secondary. The realization of Our Lord's goodness to us, and of our worthlessness, makes us happy and sad at the same time. But the sadness is lessened as it becomes an encouragement for our apostolate in the service of all that is sublime and noble, to make Jesus known, loved and served, and to take away the sins of the world.

The thought of holiness, smiling amidst trials and crosses, is always with me. Interior calm, founded on the words and promises of Christ, produces the imperturbable serenity which may be seen in face, words and behaviour, the expression of all-conquering charity. We feel a renewal of energies, physical as well as spiritual: sweetness to the soul and health to the body (Prov 16: 24, *RSV*). To live in peace with the Lord, to hear that we are forgiven, and in our turn to forgive others, gives the soul that feast of 'marrow and fat' of which the psalmist sang, and brings the Magnificat constantly to our lips.

X

'Turn away thy face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities.'

The prayer of the penitent king rises once more, imploringly, and is now broadened to include all the iniquities he has committed, besides the graver sin which has inspired the Miserere. How moving is this reference to the

Lord's face, that is to his eyes and features and his expression of scorn and anger! We shall see his face once more, on our last day, and unrepentant sinners will be smitten with eternal despair and horror.

I must make myself very familiar with this verse, as an expression of renewed contrition. One must not be afraid to call oneself a sinner. Any exaggerated form of expression spoils the effect; each must express himself according to his own temperament, but as we always need Our Lord's forgiveness, it is well to be imploring divine mercy, and trusting to it, at all times. 'A contrite and a humbled heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.' David was soon to say this. But we must not neglect any of the forms that may express this humble contrition.

XI

'Create a clean heart in me, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.'

The heart is the will and the spirit is the understanding. So we need a purified will and a renewed understanding.

Alas! how many attachments and temptations assail our will, especially in the sphere of our feelings: objects, people and circumstances! The charms of certain circles, sometimes even of a chance meeting, try it sorely. The heart is helpless by itself. Once it has been spoilt, weakened by superfluities, it has to be made anew. It is not much good patching it: the weakness reappears. The heart of Paul, the heart of Augustine, were new creations. Great God, what a miracle that was! Once they had been turned in a new direction, the wills of these two men never turned back, never faltered. In the hour of their death they were still as true as steel.

The right spirit, that is, the understanding of what is most important to believe and to do, yes, this can simply

be renewed. For this a man must have a most just conception of the chief motives of his own conduct and a more sufficient knowledge of what, in practice, he must do. The reform must be above all interior and profound, 'within me', in order to express itself externally in the various aspects of life: reform in speaking, seeing, hearing and writing; a new art of living, corresponding to a new conception of life.

XII

'Cast me not away from thy face; and take not thy holy spirit from me.'

The gravest punishment David could impose on his son Absalom, who had betrayed him, was this: 'Let him no longer see my face'.¹⁰ So we understand why he implores the Lord not to banish him from his sight. It is one thing for God to turn his face away from our iniquities, it is quite another for him to banish the sinner from his sight. The mystery of the Lord's face: how impressive and terrifying that is! On the other hand, one can understand the redeemed soul's supreme joy in the vision of the Lord's face. May the Lord grant me the grace not to be rejected by him at the end. May he be merciful and admit me, even if I am the last and least of all, that I may contemplate him for ever.

Another point: the presence of the Holy Spirit in the faithful soul. Here, without books or commentaries, I cannot verify whether this Holy Spirit of the Lord must be understood specifically as the third Person of the most Holy Trinity. It seems obvious to me that it must be so. The action of grace in a soul is described in the words 'and we will come to him and make our home with him'.¹¹ This

¹⁰2 Kg 14:24 (D).

¹¹Jn 14:23 (RSV).

means the three divine Persons. Each comes with his own personal characteristics. The Holy Spirit is the Lord and Giver of life, and it is he who sanctifies the soul. Is not the Christian a living temple of the Holy Spirit? And what a wealth of benefits to the soul comes with this indwelling of the Lord's Spirit! St Paul numbers these gifts: they are twenty-four. They begin with peace and joy.¹²

XIII

'Restore to me the joy of thy salvation, and strengthen me with a perfect spirit!'

Restore to me the joyful certainty that you will save me: serene confidence in my Saviour. St Jerome uses the apt translation 'joy of thy Jesus', instead of 'joy of thy salvation'. This is the true joy of a forgiven soul, the first fruit of the indwelling Holy Spirit, to feel numbered with the elect. And all this through the merits of Jesus who shed his blood to redeem this soul of ours and to fill it with his virtue and his life. This confidence must not be free from fear, for we bear the treasure of grace in fragile vessels; a small jolt may make us stagger: the vessel is broken again. Oh poor sinners that we are! But if we do our best the Lord continues to give us his grace, the grace of feeling we are his for ever, this foretaste of the eternal companionship with Jesus which is reserved for us, for that long day that will have no sunset. And the thought that our Saviour is Jesus himself – David in his melancholy chant sang for the New as well as for the Old Testament – oh, how it makes my heart rejoice the whole day long! The first Christians expressed this doctrine with the symbol of the fish, IXΘΥΣ – 'Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour' – and placed this sign above their tombs in the catacombs

¹²Cf. Gal 5:22.

as a pledge of resurrection, and also as a symbol of the Eucharistic mystery, known only to the initiated. What is more dear to me, a priest and Bishop, than daily contact with the great sacrament, the pledge of future glory?

And the 'perfect spirit'? This is the indispensable condition for our preservation of the joyous and certain hope of paradise. It is a habitual reception of continual graces, which keep the soul inclined towards good, like the saints in heaven, without any hesitations – a confirmation in grace, a very rare gift which the Lord grants without his chosen creature even knowing it, so that the uncertainty of possessing it may encourage the exercise of many virtues which derive from it, chaste fear, circumspection, humility, a personal recourse to God, and other virtues.

David also asked for this gift, which he called the 'perfect' spirit, that is, no common spirit but one worthy of a most noble prince, a lofty, disinterested spirit, untouched by self-love, eager only for God and his glory. St Paul too asked for it, as he subjected his body to mortification and chastisement, trembling lest 'after preaching to others, I myself should be disqualified'.¹³ I also ask for it, O Lord, with David and Paul, but feeling so puny beside them. I also ask, as a great boon, for this gift which will confirm me in a low opinion of myself and my own worthlessness, and give me a selfless longing for you, for whom alone I should live since you have died for me (cf. 2 Cor 5:15).

XIV

'I will teach the unjust thy ways, and the wicked shall be converted to thee.'

My priesthood means not only sacrifice for the sins of the world and for my own sins but also an apostolate of

¹³1 Cor 9:27 (RSV).

truth and love. My vocation leads me to this. The thought of the little I have done till now and the pardon I have received from the Lord for my past failings must induce greater fervour.

'Mercy and truth, the universal ways of God.' It is here I must distinguish myself. I must not be a teacher of political science, of strategy, of human knowledge: there are teachers galore of these subjects. I am a teacher of mercy and truth. And by teaching these I shall also contribute a great deal to the social order. This is stated also in the Psalms: 'Mercy and truth have met together: justice and peace have kissed'.¹⁴ My teaching must be by word and example: therefore principles and exhortations from my lips and encouragement from my conduct in the eyes of all, Catholics, Orthodox, Turks and Jews. 'Words move but examples draw.'

'The wicked shall be converted to thee.' The problem of the conversion of the irreligious and apostate world presents one of the mysteries which weigh most heavily on my soul. However, the solution is not my business but the Lord's secret. On my shoulders, on the shoulders of all priests, all Catholics, rests the solemn duty of working together for the conversion of this impious world and for the return of heretics and schismatics to the unity of the Church and the preaching of Christ to the Jews who put him to death. We are not responsible for the result. Our sole comfort, but it is enough for our peace of mind, is knowing that Jesus the Saviour is much more anxious than we are for the salvation of souls: he wants them to be saved through our co-operation, but it is his grace alone, working in their souls, which saves them; and his grace will not be lacking when the moment comes for their conversion. This moment will be one of the most joyful surprises of our glorified souls in heaven.

¹⁴Ps 84:11 (D).

XV

'Deliver me from blood, O God, thou God of my salvation, and my tongue shall extol thy justice.'

To this verse dear Father Segneri devotes no fewer than fifteen pages of comment, in which he says some fine things, but in too ornate a manner. For me the interpretation must be more simple and practical. What is this 'blood' from which the royal Psalmist begs the Lord to deliver him? I do not know the exegetic interpretation of this. Looking at it from my own angle I choose to see in this:

(1) The internal impulses of carnal desire, the result of our 'natural infirmity', of the tainted blood which mankind has inherited from its first source in fallen Eve. Advancing years, when one is in the sixties like me, wither the evil impulses to some extent, and it is a real pleasure to observe the silence and tranquility of the flesh, which has now become old and irresponsive to the temptations which disturbed it in the years of my youth and vigorous maturity. However, one must always be on the alert. The Bible speaks also of the foolish, doting old man, one of 'the three things my soul hates'.¹⁵

(2) Excessive attachment to members of one's own family which, when they are felt beyond the limits of charity, become an embarrassment and a hindrance. The law of the apostolate and the priesthood is above the law of flesh and blood. Therefore I must love my own kith and kin, and go to their assistance when their poverty makes this necessary, because this is an obvious duty for one who does so much to help strangers, but all must be done discreetly, in a purely priestly spirit, in an orderly and impartial manner. My closest relations, brothers, sisters,

¹⁵Cf. Eccles 25:3-4.

nephews and nieces, with very few exceptions, are exemplary Christians and give me great joy. But it would never do for me to get mixed up in their affairs and concerns, so as to be diverted from my duties as a servant of the Holy See, and a Bishop!

(3) Patriotism, which is right and may be holy, but may also degenerate into nationalism, which in my case would be most detrimental to the dignity of my episcopal ministry, must be kept above all nationalistic disputes. The world is poisoned with morbid nationalism, built up on the basis of race and blood, in contradiction to the Gospel. In this matter especially, which is of burning topical interest, 'deliver me from men of blood, O God'. Here fits in most aptly the invocation: 'God of my salvation': Jesus our Saviour died for all nations, without distinction of race or blood, and became the first brother of the new human family, built on him and his Gospel.

With what enthusiasm and liberty the tongue of the priest and Bishop, thus loosed from earthly ties, will be able to preach to all the Lord's commands, and to praise his justice, mercy and peace, in the name of the Father who is God of all virtues, the Son who is God of salvation, and the Holy Spirit who is God of peace! In the enjoyment of this holy liberty how much more joy is felt in the sacred ministry of souls! 'Thy statutes have been my songs in the place of my pilgrimage' (Ps 119 (118):54, *RSV*). 'Come, let us praise the Lord with joy; let us joyfully sing to God our Saviour' (Ps 94:1, *D*).

XVI

'Lord thou wilt open my lips, and my mouth shall declare thy praise.'

This is one of the best loved verses in the whole Psalm. The priest's morning prayer, his 'sacrifice of praise', opens

with these words. They breathe such poetry and tenderness! The priest is also a teacher, and his lips must guard the truth. How fine it would be to begin all sermons, discourses, and all forms of teaching thus: 'Lord, thou wilt open my lips'. After the invocation comes the whole Office, distributed in the various Hours of day and night. This sets the tone for the whole sacred ministry of the Word, which is the announcement of the good tidings, an exaltation of religious truth and a hymn of glory to the Lord.

When Father Segneri reaches this verse he jumps a whole octave: omitting the literal interpretations of the exegetes, he invites the contemplative soul to see in this declaration of praise the exaltation of the Lord's greatest work, in which he employed the fulness of his powers, that is the founding of Holy Church, which came to pass ten centuries after the time of David but was foreseen by him as God's masterpiece, wrought by means of his Christ. In fact elsewhere (Ps 48 (47):1, *RSV*) it is said: 'Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised'. But where? On earth, in the sea, in the air, in fire, in the sky, in the stars, in the sun? No, but in the 'city of our God, his holy mountain'.¹⁶ This interpretation is shared by St Robert Bellarmine, who writes: 'Among those things which have been revealed to us we have hardly anything greater, or from which we may better discover the greatness of God, so as to praise it more fervently, than the founding of the Church'. Having made this point, Segneri finds reasons to infer that, as David wished to give God the greatest possible praise in return for the many benefits he had recovered with God's forgiveness, he chose this as the main theme for his ready harp. This was to be the grandest achievement of all ages, and David, viewing it from afar

¹⁶Ps 48 (47):2 (*RSV*).

with the spirit of a prophet, wanted to have the honour of announcing it: 'My mouth shall declare thy praise'.

When we think that these words are repeated at all Matins, in the name of Holy Church, who prays for herself and for the whole world, and repeated by innumerable lips opened by the touch of the grace they have invoked, the vision broadens, comes alive and is fulfilled. Here the Church is seen not as a historic monument of the past but as a living institution. Holy Church is not like a palace that is built in a year. It is a vast city which must one day cover the whole universe: 'With the joy of the whole earth is Mount Sion founded; in the far north the city of the great king'.¹⁷ The building was begun twenty centuries ago, but it spreads and stretches through all lands until the name of Christ is everywhere adored. As the Church increases so new nations, hearing the good news, rejoice: 'And when the Gentiles heard this, they were glad' (Acts 13:48, *RSV*). The pious and daring commentator concludes with a thought that is very fine and uplifting for every priest as he reads his Breviary: everyone must take part in this building of Holy Church. He whose work is preaching this grand enterprise must, as a messenger of his Gospel, say to the Lord: 'Lord, thou wilt open my lips and my mouth shall declare thy praise'. A priest who is not engaged in missionary work should long to co-operate in the great task of the apostolate, and when he reads the Psalms privately in his cell he also should say, 'Lord, thou wilt open my lips', because even there, through the communion of love, he must consider as his own voice any voice that is at that moment announcing the Gospel, 'the supreme praise of God which has given us the theme for this verse, more charged with hidden mysteries than with words'.

¹⁷Ps 48 (47):3 (*RSV*).

XVII

'For if thou hadst desired sacrifice, I would indeed have given it: with burnt-offerings thou wilt not be delighted.'

These words reveal David's willingness for sacrifice, for any sacrifice. The thought of the sin he has committed still weighs on his heart. Since he has acknowledged the gravity of his twofold crime, the rape of another man's wife and the murder of an innocent man – and it took him a year to realize this – he feels that the proper expiation should be death. This would be in accordance with the Mosaic law. But since the prophet has assured him, 'The Lord has put away your sin: you shall not die',¹⁸ he knows that he must make an offering to the Lord of all that is the expression of death, that is, the annihilation of everything, before the offended majesty of God: hence the sacrifice according to the legal requirements and, since he was inordinately rich, a more abundant sacrifice in burnt-offerings and in creatures of the earth. But the Lord did not want him to offer these forms of sacrifice, prescribed for the Jews who had come from Egypt, where they had been workers with straw, earth and lime. For one who was to be a progenitor of Christ, for a man made after God's own heart, these forms of worship and expiation were too ignoble. Therefore the Lord did not want them from him, and would take no delight in burnt-offerings. But David was right when he showed his willingness to offer them, in order at least to show himself ready to obey the divine commands.

Readiness for self-sacrifice, such as the Lord wants from every one of us, and in the measure he requires, this must present a great lesson and warning for me. This is what loyal and sincere devotion means. Not just shedding consoling tears during prayer but preparing a ready will

¹⁸2 Sam 12:13 (*RSV*).

for God's service, whatever it may be. 'My heart is ready, O God, my heart is ready',¹⁹ for much or for little, to do what God wants of me and understand what he does not want, which therefore must not be done. So frequently we are deceived about this. We take pleasure in fashioning for ourselves ways of serving the Lord which really are simply ways of expressing our own taste, our own ambition, our own caprice. 'The pride of your heart has deceived you, you who dwell in the clefts of the rock' (Obad 3, *RSV*). You hardly know how to take, in God's service, one step outside your hole, in which, like a tarantula, you take refuge from the storms that rage, and yet you like to persuade yourself that you could fly like an eagle if you received a call from beyond the mountains and beyond the seas. In your piety you have unwittingly deceived yourself. Let the readiness of your will be seen in works done to carry out the will of the Lord, as this is made known to you day by day, and do not show this readiness merely by heaving fervent sighs.

XVIII

'A sacrifice to God is an afflicted spirit: a contrite and humbled heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.'

The sacrifice that is most pleasing to God is the spirit beset by trials, indeed doubly beset because to the torment of the spirit is frequently added the suffering of the body which with the soul has played its own large part in doing evil. If we consider this doctrine apart from the particular case of David, the repentant sinner, it sets before us that great mystery of the Cross and of all suffering which is the surest way to priestly and episcopal perfection.

During my retreat in Rustchuk in May 1930 I was

¹⁹Ps 56:8 (*D*).

entirely absorbed in this doctrine which, moreover, appeared to me with amazing clarity when I prostrated myself before the altar of San Carlo al Corso in Rome, during the ceremony of my episcopal consecration, and arose from that ceremony bearing with me a clear impression of resemblance, at least in my soul, with Christ crucified. 'Make me love thy Cross'. I must frequently repeat this invocation! Until now I have suffered too little. My own happy nature, which is a great gift from God, has kept me immune from those afflictions which accompany daring and generous spirits who hurl themselves like living flames into their zealous labour for souls. But it is only to be expected that, before the end of my humble life, the Lord will send me trials of a particularly painful nature. Well, I am ready: provided that the Lord, who sends me these, will also grant me the strength to bear them with calm, dignity and sweetness. I read in the life of the last Mistress of Novices, Mother Maria Alfonsa, of these Sisters of Sion whose pleasant hospitality I enjoy, that the spirit of this Institute consists in *abnégation souriante*. Oh, this motto is just right for me! I desire always to be ready for the interior sacrifice, which must be borne with humility, in a spirit of penitence and with a contrite heart – 'a contrite heart in ashes' as is said of all the most famous characters of the Old Testament, and as we read of the most beloved saints of the New. It is enough to think of St Francis of Assisi, whose prayer was always the same: 'O Jesus, have mercy on me, a sinner'. To help me to acquire this contrite spirit I will be most careful and fervent in celebrating Holy Mass, which transports me to the garden of Gethsemane, to the most secret sanctuary of Christ's sufferings. I shall find the necessary trials also in the series of daily pinpricks for which I have to find a perfect answer through compliance, patience, resignation and justice, dignity and peace.

XIX

'Deal favourably, O Lord, in thy good-will with Sion, that the walls of Jerusalem may be built up!'

Biblical exegesis has a wonderful opportunity here to exercise itself in the examination of the three meanings: literal, allegorical or mystical, and anagogic. The royal prophet, raised up again after his sin, ready for sacrifice, looks towards the future and prays that it may be one of glorification for his merciful God. The favourable treatment he begs for his house, established on Mount Sion, which will permit him to rebuild the walls of the royal city, foreshadows the appearance of Christ the Saviour: 'The goodness and loving-kindness of God our Saviour appeared, says St Paul (Tit 3:4, *RSV*). Sion was to see the dynasties of the kings of Judah, which gave place to Constantine and then to the more firmly established and un-failing pontifical religious monarchy. Jerusalem is Holy Church, which pitches its tents in every part of the world and has firm, massive walls, sometimes breached here and there but rebuilt and fortified more strongly than ever. From the mystic Jerusalem, or Church Militant, we raise our eyes to the heavenly Jerusalem, or Church Triumphant, which awaits us in the final consummation. The last notes of David's Miserere set the tone for St John's Apocalyptic vision which, after the description of the 'blessed vision of peace', ends with the prayer 'Come, Lord Jesus'.²⁰

My poor heart too is ravished and moved by these splendours and from them I draw encouragement to do my best to co-operate in preaching the spirit of Jesus from Mount Sion, and in the extension and restoration of the walls of Jerusalem, in the service of Holy Church, as

²⁰Apoc 22:20 (*D*).

Providence has decided for me, who, though the humblest of the Bishops and representatives of the Holy See, am none the less desirous to honour my vocation.

These remaining years should be my best years of earnest, effective and worthy co-operation in the great work carried on by the Catholic Church, from the sacred heights of Sion to the ramparts of Jerusalem. May Jesus accept at least my good intention and bless it graciously, in his good will.

XX

'Then shalt thou accept the sacrifice of justice, oblations, and whole burnt-offerings. Then shall they lay calves upon thy altar.'

This speaks of the great and authentic sacrifice which Jesus offered for us when 'he delivered himself for us, an oblation and a sacrifice to God for an odour of sweetness' (Eph 5:2, *D*).

David, in rapt contemplation, saw this from afar, the true sacrifice of justice and universal atonement which, from the summit of the sacred hill that rises between Sion and Moriah, was to complete all other sacrifices all over the world, and also endow with divine virtue all the sacrifices that would be made by millions down through the centuries who, drawn by a passionate love for the Cross, would offer their penitence and suffering, as they shared in the Mystical Body of Christ.

Around the sacrifice of the Cross it is well to contemplate these 'oblations and whole burnt-offerings'. They are the apostles, confessors, martyrs, saints of every age. Here are the virgins whose life was and continues to be the glory of Holy Church, all fervour, all sacrifice, all blood. 'Like a sacrificial burnt-offering he accepted

them'.²¹ A mount of oblations and burnt sacrifices, often obscure and unknown, rising towards the Most High, in propitiation for the whole world. And the calf or calves placed on the altar? The commentators are agreed in seeing in this the image of the Holy Eucharist, by means of which the sacrifice of the Cross is mystically and no less truly and perpetually renewed. What an honour for a priest or Bishop, in this ministry that has been entrusted to him, to offer the divine victim on the altar every day! But what a responsibility before heaven and earth!

Ah, Lord Jesus, I take refuge in my nothingness, I plead for pity and forgiveness for my failings, I renew the consecration of my life to your worship, your love, your altar. 'Have mercy on me, O God, have mercy on me.'

²¹Wisd 3:6 (RSV).

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