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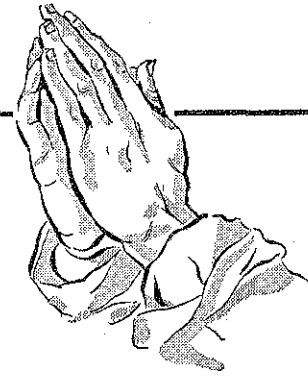


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Missionary Penance

by KILIAN McDONNELL, O.S.B.

"A RELIGIOUS MAN thinks of nothing but himself," wrote the nineteenth-century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. In the lives of devout Christians the good pagan often notices a righteous unconcern, a majestic insensitivity, about the welfare of others. This is unfortunately one of the perils of perfection as Nietzsche's observation is often verified. The elect of God often show a dislike of being disturbed; they manifest a great wariness when it comes to the needs, spiritual and physical, of others.

Perhaps the core of the problem is to be found in the definition of perfection. It goes without saying that perfection is a highly personal affair. Sanctity is my own personal business to which I must give myself with heroic constancy. But sanctity is more than personal effort and personal concern.

When I speak of my striving for sanctity, I am not speaking of an effort which is self-sufficient, autonomous, unrelated to other persons who are also destined for God and striving to attain Him. Sanctity is not even, in spite of the expressions found in some spiritual books, the isolation of the soul in God. In the radical sense, isolation of the soul in God is what sanctity is not.

Though the idea of sanctity is highly personal (I-Thou), it is also highly social (we-Thou). Sanctity concerns my relationship to others as well as my relationship to God. If we omit the social, communal aspect, if we think of sanctity as isolation in God from the pain and wants of others, we canonize selfishness posing as undivided love.

We arrive at a balanced definition of sanctity when we define it in terms of the Church (we are not here concerned with the very real sanctity of many Protestants). Sanctity is the love and life of God by which the Body of Christ—the Church—lives. The Mystical Body of Christ has many members. The growth in love is the concern of each member and of the whole Body. The eye cannot say to the hand "I have no need of you." For the eye there is no

health, no growth, indeed no life apart from the whole body. There is no sanctity for the member apart from the body. The isolated Catholic has no sanctity apart from the Body of Christ, the Church; nor is there sanctity apart from the concern for the sanctity and welfare of the whole body.

That sanctity is to be achieved through the life of the Church, in union with and concern for all the members of the body of Christ, is the teaching of both Scripture and tradition. St. Paul wrote: "You are the body of Christ, member-for member. . . . There was to be no want of unity in the body; all the different parts of it were to make each other's welfare their common care."

About the year 96, Pope Saint Clement wrote in a similar vein: "Let the whole of our body (the whole Church) be maintained in Christ Jesus. . . . Let the strong care for the weak and the weak respect the strong; let the rich support the poor and the poor render thanks to God for giving them means for supplying their needs."

Lent is usually thought of in terms of increased personal devotion, penance, mortification, fasting, and frequent attendance at Mass. Each man is supposed to put away ease of life and to make up for the negligences of other times.

The season of Lent is the period when Christians deepen their consciousness of being the Church, of contributing to the growth of the Body of Christ. During this time they are to pray for the great needs of Christ's body. At the beginning of Lent the Church proclaims what she technically calls a *jejunium solemne*. Literally this could be rendered "a solemn fast." Because the fast of Lent is solemn it is a "public fast," or in more colloquial English, a fast of the whole Church. There are not so many isolated individuals all performing their individual fast, doing penance for their own personal sins. There is not even a fast to which each gives himself when he wishes and in the measure that he wishes. The fast is rather a practice of the Church, decreed as the fast for the

whole Christian community and practiced by the whole community under the control of the Church's authority.

The penitential exercises are performed for the spiritual good of the individual soul but also for the needs of the Church. At the end of Lent, on Good Friday, the Church gathers all the needs of the Church and gives them public expression in what are called the Solemn Prayers. The Church prays for peace, for the Pope, bishops, priests, faithful, for freedom from disease and famine; she prays for prisoners, the sick, for the conversion of Protestants, pagans and Jews; for all sinners.

If the Catholic abstains from smoking, or denies himself a magazine, and then after Easter buys himself a golf club with the money he has saved by so denying himself, his penance is undoubtedly meritorious. But this is not the Church's idea of penance. She is preaching a penance practiced in the spirit of the Church and for the Church. In this she is following the teaching of Saint Leo the Great: "Let us supplement our fasting with works of mercy toward the poor. . . . Let us go hungry for a while and take from our usual fare some small thing that may be of service to the poor who are in need." Fasting in the Church has an apostolic, missionary character. It is directed toward the health and the growth of the whole Body of Christ. What the Catholic saves by fasting and mortification might be sent to the Propagation of the Faith, which has special charge of Christ's poor.

Nietzsche was right. The religious man thinks only of himself, thinks only of the body of which all men are either actual or potential members. The concern of the religious man is more than that of merely giving faith to those who do not possess it. The missionary, and such the Catholic layman is, must save bodies as well as souls. More correct, he must save men. This apostolic, missionary preoccupation is the dimension of his prayer, his penance, and his charity.