

Mollens, 25 August 1988

The Penance That Heaven Asks of Us

I had an opportunity to do some reading on great saints the Church honours, and also to watch some films about them.

One of the strongest impressions I took away was the harsh, very harsh life of penance that some of them lived; they often wore the most uncomfortable hairshirts, practiced continual fasts, painful vigils, interminable silences, sleeping on the bare ground or on boards. It was also on the strength of these penances that these saints became what they were.

Naturally I asked myself: What about us? What do we do? Don't we too want to become saints?

And immediately, in my soul, I got a clear answer: "You (individually and collectively) must look to Mary. It is she who is your model. About her, who lived in the midst of the world like most of you, not so much is known regarding penances she may have practiced as about the sufferings God asked of her through the circumstances of her wonderful, extraordinary but also extremely painful life. Just look at the way she lived them, so well that she became known as the queen of martyrs."

Yes, we must look at Mary.

There is no doubt that for us too suffering has a great place in our life: Just think of all that Jesus Forsaken means in our existence.

As a result it is impossible to be afraid of our having missed something. We have pains, pains, and therefore penances. What counts is to live them the way Mary did.

It is certainly not excluded that we too may do some corporal or spiritual penance, especially the ones the Church recommends at certain periods. But in this respect we ought to imitate Mary above all.

I thought back to her who manifested herself as "the Desolate". We recognized her in this aspect as a monument of sanctity, as the saint par excellence, as the personification of all the virtues.

And the desire grew up anew in my heart to relive her under this aspect.

To relive her in the total renunciation of herself (since virtue lies in this), to imitate her in her knowing how to lose everything, everything, even God her own Son.

How can we do this? By living the way we did years ago when we understood her rather profoundly. They were times when the Spirit was emphasizing in a variety of ways how necessary it was that we do not our own will but God's; and how we needed to live it well and live it fully in the present moment of life. But we understood this would not be possible if we did not always give up in the present everything that was not God's will, if we did not abdicate decisively from our own will.

I have tried to live that way again, and I have seen how good it is for the soul; it rejuvenates the soul and renews it. There is nothing old in what God has given us and taught us; our spirituality being evangelical can always, like the gospel, offer cues for new life, in its every expression and at every moment.

So with this conference call I am inviting you too to live this way.

Let us pause a moment. Watch the way that time passes. Place ourselves firmly in the present, fulfilling God's will and decisively denying our own, sacrificing everything in our hearts or minds which has nothing to do with the present. It could be some very vivid memory, a deep feeling, an object, a person.... Let us apply our heart, mind, and strength just to the will of God. This way we truly love God, with all our heart, mind and strength: God, our Ideal.

It's a wonderful gymnastic: It is dying every time to always rise again. It is the principal penance that heaven asks of the members of the Work of Mary.

(taken from: Journey to Heaven, Spiritual Thoughts to Live, New City Press, 1997, pp.103-105)