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Penance In The Old School

In the early days of the Church, penitents had a strong sense of sin. They also had a vivid appreciation of the punishment due to sin. Fasting, almsgiving, and other penitential practices were in great vogue. And they had teeth in them, too!

Why? Because everyone was in favor of working off his temporal punishment here on earth in order to avoid, if he could, the pointedly detailed suffering that awaited him after the Judgment. And the penances given in Confession conformed to this same pattern. Often they were king-size in quantity and duration.

If you sinned publicly, you did public penance -- such as standing at the church door, in sackcloth and ashes, begging the faithful to remember you in their prayers. If you sinned privately and seriously, the confessor might assign you to fast on bread and water three days a week for many months -- maybe for as long as seven years. It wasn't easy to be proud and survive. Penance was a reality that leveled the haughty, shamed the selfish, hardened and toughened the namby-pamby set, softened the obdurate, and brought all to a fine humility. They courted austerity; it was the order of the day, and they employed it to the hilt.

Now, we are not so visibly penitential. The penances assigned in Confession are mild, indeed. They are rather "token" punishments, but nevertheless salutary in accord with the bounty of the Holy Ghost and the dispositions of the penitents who put hearts into their performances.

Don't Be Gullible

Today there is a philosophy that belittles penance. Freud detests "guilt feelings" and adds that those who do penance are mentally deranged. Many penologists will tell you that criminals are sick rather than wicked; hence, they need hospitals rather than prisons. Self-punishment and self-denial are handily dubbed an abnormality, masochism. Punishing others is put in the same category, sadism.

All this is dished up by certain Godless experts as "scientific"; and all too many accept it wholeheartedly and find it much to their liking -- because it does away with so many disagreeable and downright uncomfortable practices. You'll find yourself marching in this camp, if you lean on convenience rather than reason and Faith.

Our good friend, St. Thomas would never settle for such specious reasoning. He was not one to water down arguments and practices that have fashioned saints as well as scholars.

And so, we recommend that you stay with the old school of thought on this matter of penance -- in both its effectiveness and its necessity. Don't wander beyond earshot of the stubborn and unqualified directive of Our Lord: "Unless you do penance, you shall all likewise perish."

Unless you are on your toes, the Notre Dame Lenten dispensation could make a travesty of self-denial. But it shouldn't be that way with real men. Now that we are in Passiontide, it is good for us to scan the past few weeks -- to examine our conscience, and to ask ourselves if we have really made the most of Lent, and justified the dispensation granted to us. Happily for us, there is still time to make amends. Remember Purgatory, and you'll want to make the most of Passiontide.