

CHAPTER XII

The Forgiveness of Sins

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TENTH ARTICLE OF THE CREED.

The Forgiveness of Sins.

159. St. Thais' Penance. - There are few penitential lives more famous than that of St. Thais. She was a miserable sinner of Egypt, who lived in the fourth century, and employed for the ruin of souls the graces and talents she had received from nature. God inspired a holy abbot named Paphnutius with the desire of labouring for her conversion. He went in search of her and spoke to her at first on indifferent subjects. How great was his surprise to find her passably well instructed in her religion!!? "Now," said he, "you know, then, that there is a God?" - "Not only do I know that there is a God, but I also know that He is present everywhere, that He sees all we do, and will one day judge us; the good shall go to the everlasting kingdom, and the wicked to a hell that shall never end." - "What! Thais, you know all that, and yet do evil! you destroy your own soul and the souls of others!" - "Father, I see that you are a man of God," said the poor woman, melting into tears; "impose on me whatever penance you please; I hope that God in His mercy will have pity on me. I only ask three hours to myself, and I return all yours." She left him immediately, went to collect her dress, her jewels, and all her finery, with what money she possessed, made a heap of them in the midst of the market-place, and set fire to them with her own hands. She returned then to St. Paphnutius, who shut her up in a little cell, close by a convent of nuns. He built up the door, and left her only a small window through which some bread and water was every day given her. Thais then asked him what prayer she should say to God. - "To God! miserable sinner, you are unworthy even to pronounce His holy name. You will merely say to Him, without daring to raise your hands or eyes to heaven: 'O You who created me, have mercy on me!'" (See, children, how much more seriously the old-time Fathers took the horror of sinning than we lax moderns!) At the end of three years, God made known to St. Paphnutius that this heroic penitent had found favour in His sight. They opened her voluntary prison, although she begged with tears to be permitted to end her days in it. "Not so, my daughter," said her spiritual father, "God has forgiven you your sins." But that soul, sanctified by penance, was ripe for heaven; she died a fortnight after, and merited to be honoured as a Saint. - GODESCARD, Vie des Saints, (Lives of the Saints) 8th October.

160. David, Captain of Robbers. - However great may be the sins which we have committed, we may always obtain pardon of them, provided we do a sufficient penance for them. This was experienced by a famous robber captain, named David, who devastated the Thebaide, in Upper Egypt, in the fourth century. This unhappy man had killed and robbed hundreds, and even thousands of passengers or travellers; his depredations were so well and widely known, that people trembled at his very name. One day, nevertheless, God touched his heart, and David went to entreat the Superior of a monastery to receive him into his house. The Abbot did not recognize him; only, seeing him

already old, he told him that his advanced age would not permit him to follow all the austerities of the rule. and that he would do better to remain in the world. The robber chief insisted; but seeing that he gained nothing, he drew himself up, and said in a voice of thunder, "Do you not know me? Know then that I am David, the robber chief. I ask to enter here to do penance, and I swear that if you will not receive me, I will go back to my brigands, who know me; we will destroy all before us, kill every soul we meet, and then come and set fire to the convent." When the Abbot heard this, he said to him with a twinkle in his eye that such an attitude showed zeal but a lack of true sorrow for past sins. But now seeing the genuineness of David's desire to somehow make up for his past faults, you may be sure the Abbot hastened to admit David into his monastery. The religious habit was given to the fierce penitent, who began by confessing his sins, and then gave himself up to the rudest austerity. All the day, and even all the night, he was heard to cry - "Mercy, my God, have mercy on me!" He accused himself aloud of his past crimes, and with so many tears and sighs, that they sometimes thought he would die. After he had passed several years in this hard penance, a heavenly voice said to him one day, "David, all your sins are forgiven you." - "That is not possible," cried he in his misplaced humility, "I will never believe it, I have committed too many crimes." - "To punish you, David, for this want of faith, and to convince you of the truth of what I tell you, you shall remain dumb till your death; speech shall only be given you when it is necessary to sing the Office." This prediction was instantaneously accomplished. David spoke with ease when the time came for saying the Office, but beyond that he could not utter a single word. I need scarcely tell you, my young friends, that he died in the door of sanctity, since his sins had been forgiven him. - BOLLANDUS, Act. Sanc. (Acts of the Saints), 26th June.

161. A Very Difficult Confession. - It is very easy for us to confess our sins, since we have only to tell them to one person, who is, moreover, bound to the strictest secrecy. Which of you, dear children, would have the courage to do as did that individual of whom St. John Climachus speaks? "A man who had previously made profession of being a robber, came to a monastery in Alexandria, during the time that I was there. He wished, he said, to embrace the religious life. The Superior, fearing that he was not sincere in taking this step, would put him a little to the proof: He commanded him to keep still for seven days, after which he made him declare all the sins he had ever committed. The poor sinner confessed them very sincerely; but the Abbot said to him: "I desire that for your penance, you accuse yourself of your sins before all the brothers in the monastery. The man, who was touched with a true sorrow for his crimes, and had such a horror of them that he shrank from no shame or humiliation on account of them, answered that he was ready to confess them, not only before the brethren, but even, if it was desired, in the middle of Alexandria. Notice, children, how much easier it is for us in these days to perform the simple penances imposed on us for our sins. Then the Superior assembled all the brethren, to the number of three hundred and thirty, and as it was Sunday, after the reading of the Gospel, he brought forward the criminal, already justified before God. He was brought forward with his hands fastened behind his back, clad in haircloth, and with ashes on his head. Such a spectacle, of which they knew not the cause, touched the brethren so deeply that they all burst into tears. The holy Abbot, so zealous for the salvation of those under his direction, cried aloud to the penitent: "Stay where you are! you are not worthy to penetrate farther!" These words so terrified him, that he fell prostrate on the ground. Thus did he show the sincerity of his remorse. He then began to confess all the sins he had ever committed, which he did before all the brethren, and with marks of penitence and contrition that edified all present. After this public confession, the Abbot made him cut off his hair, and received

him into his community. He died a most holy death a few years after. - ST. JOHN CLIMACHUS, Holy Ladder.

162. The Ring Thrown into the Moselle. - No one knows whether they are in a state of grace, or a state of sin, says St. Peter; hence it is that we have to work out our salvation in fear and trembling as St Paul says in Philippians 2:12. Still we must not suffer our anxiety to lead us into despair, because the goodness of God is infinite. St. Arnoul, a celebrated minister of France in the reign of Clotaire II in the seventh century (died in 629), and who afterwards became bishop of Metz, was one day much occupied with the desire of knowing whether God had forgiven him the sins of his youth, and completely effaced them from the book of His justice. His uncertainty on this point long tormented him, and filled his heart with the liveliest anxiety. Plunged in these despairing doubts, he went one day to the bridge over the Moselle, at Metz, stopped suddenly, and took the pastoral ring off his finger, and threw it into the river, saying: "If I find that ring again, I will believe that my sins are forgiven me." Although Arnoul be a saint, one cannot help blaming him here, for he gave no great proof of his confidence in the divine mercy or the efficacy of penance. (Mind you, children, a saint is not always a saint, and the happy outcome of this story I am telling greatly increased the fervour of Arnoul's love, faith and trust in God.) We should do wrong, therefore, to imitate him. A long interval passed without Arnoul having any reason to suppose that his prayer was heard; nevertheless his ring was found one day in the belly of a fish that was served on his table. This event was noised abroad, and the miraculous ring was placed in a church. The historian, Paul Warnefrid, asserts that he heard the story from the mouth of the Emperor Charlemagne in the year of the latter's coronation, 800 A.D. The Emperor had seen the ring with his own eyes, in the Church of St. Sebastian at Metz. It was exhibited every year to pilgrims and the curious. For us, my friends, let us have more confidence in God than in St. Arnoul's ring - PAUL WARNEFRID, *Histoire des Eveques de Metz* (History of the Bishops of Metz).

163. The Body of a Damned Soul. - Sin confessed is half forgiven, says the proverb (since we must always have contrition and be willing to do our penance); but, my friends, he who has not confessed, (or who has not formed the genuine desire to confess, in the case of imminent death), well, his sins cannot be forgiven either in this world or the other. There is a lamentable proof of this recorded in the Chronicles of the Benedictines. A young man named Pelagius, led in his father's house, where he was employed keeping sheep, a life so exemplary, that every one regarded him as a Saint. He lived so for several years. After the death of his parents, he sold all his goods, distributed the proceeds amongst the poor, and retired to a desert, where he led a most edifying life. But one day he had the misfortune to consent to a bad thought, not just any bad thought but a truly grievous offence against God's law. He had not the courage to confess it, for fear of losing the good opinion of his confessor, and fell into a deep melancholy. Meanwhile his angel guardian appeared to him visibly under the figure of a pilgrim and said to him: "Go, Pelagius, confess your sin, and God will forgive you, and you shall recover the peace of your soul." Thus warned, Pelagius took the resolution of merely doing penance, flattering himself that God would perhaps forgive him his sin without his confessing it. In that hope he entered a monastery, where he led a most austere life, in fasting and continual penance. Finding himself at the hour of death, he confessed for the last time, still without daring to confess his hidden grievous sin. Every one thought him a Saint, and he was buried with honour. But what was the result? Three days in succession his body was found outside the grave, without any one knowing how it came there. The last time it happened the Superior went thither with all his monks and addressing the dead body he said aloud: "Pelagius, you did obey me when alive; obey me now when you are dead. Tell me, in God's name, whether it be His will that

you are buried in some other place?" - "Alas!" cried the dead man, "I am damned for having concealed in confession a grievously bad thought on which I had dwelt with pleasure, with full knowledge and full consent. Behold the state in which my body is!" At the same moment his body appeared all on fire like red-hot iron. The sight terrified every one present, and the Superior caused Pelagius to be buried outside the cemetery of the monastery. See, my friends, what a dreadful thing it is to die without having obtained full remission of one's sins. You will note, too, my young friends, that the name of the villain in this story happens to be the same as that heretic of the fifth century, born in Britain, who advocated the erroneous idea that someone could go to heaven entirely by his own efforts and that he didn't need the grace of God or the Sacraments of the Church. - ABBE FAVRE, *Le Ciel Ouvert*, (Heaven is Open) 59.
