

Meditations

By John Baptist de La Salle

Fourth Sunday of Advent

Translated by Richard Arnandez, FSC, and Augustine Loes, FSC
Edited by Augustine Loes, FSC, and Francis Huether, FSC



The Baptist Testifies to Jesus—Icon of Baptism of Christ

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GOSPEL: SAINT LUKE 3:1–6

By penance and freedom from sin, we prepare ourselves to receive Jesus Christ.

4.1 First Point

According to today's Gospel, Saint John went about all the country adjoining the Jordan, preaching the baptism of penance for the remission of sins,¹ in order to prepare the Jews for the coming of our Lord. By doing this, Saint John makes known to us that the principal dispositions we must bring to the reception of our Lord are penance and separation from all sin. We must, then, give our greatest effort to this, because penance washes and purifies a soul of the sins that sully it.

Saint Leo calls penance simply a baptism; Saint Gregory of Nazianzen calls it a painful baptism; Saint Ambrose says that David spoke of this baptism when he tells us that he wore himself out sighing and weeping, drenched his couch nightly with his tears, and soaked his pillow with his weeping.²

We too ought to be able to say the same thing as David, because we need penance no less than he did if we wish to draw Jesus Christ to us. This is why, as the Gloss says, each of you must expiate the sins of your past by penance, so that you may once again draw near to the salvation you have lost and recover the facility of returning to God, from whom you have strayed. This is why God declared, by one of the Prophets, be converted to me by fasting, weeping, and mourning.³ For they are the surest means of finding God when we have lost him, the means that contribute most to obtaining for us that purity of heart which David so ardently begged from the Lord. It was also with this in mind that he asked God, Wash me yet more from my iniquities, and purify me from my sins.⁴

This penitent king was fully persuaded that the stains of a sinful soul will not be washed away except by the tears that flow from a humble and contrite heart. Let us frequently beg God for the grace to cleanse

ourselves so perfectly that no trace of our sins will remain, and on our part, let us contribute to this by the penance we perform for our sins.

4.2 Second Point

It is said of Saint John that he preached penance for the remission of sins,⁵ because it is penance that procures the remission of sins for those who have offended God. Saint Peter said to the Jews in the Acts of the Apostles, Do penance, and be converted, so that your sins may be forgiven.⁶ For such is the specific end of this virtue; it alone can appease the heart of God irritated against sinners. God tells us this in Ezechiel, saying that if the wicked man does penance for all the sins he has committed, keeps all my precepts, and acts according to equity and justice, I will no longer remember all his iniquities, and they will no more be imputed to him.⁷ Saint Peter, preaching to the Jewish people to make known to them the truths of the Gospel, told them, Do penance to obtain the remission of your sins.⁸

It was also by means of this same virtue that the Ninevites, who had outraged heaven by their disorderly conduct, induced God to revoke the sentence he had pronounced against them to destroy their city.⁹ This they could not do except by a conversion of their hearts, following the preaching of Jonas and the invitation of their king. To avert the calamity that threatened them, there was no other recourse for them, says Saint Ambrose, than to fast continually and cover themselves with sackcloth and ashes to appease the anger of God.

By the same method, you too will obtain the remission of all the sins you committed in the world and all those you still commit every day in God's house. For, as Saint Jerome observes, every day God still addresses to people the same threats he addressed to the Ninevites, so that just as these menaces frightened those sinful people, they may in the same way convince people who are living now to do penance. Let us, then, profit by such an admirable example.

4.3 Third Point

As the Prophet Ezechiel informs us, penance not only obtains for us the remission of our sins but also preserves us from sin, which is the greatest blessing we can enjoy in this world. For after saying that if the wicked man does penance for all his sins, God will no longer

remember them, he adds that man will live by practicing the works of justice, and he will not die.¹⁰ This is why Saint Peter comforts us so much when he tells us that the Lord, on the day of his coming, will find in peace of soul those who have brought forth a worthy harvest of penance,¹¹ because he will find them free from sin. By this means, remarks Theodoret, they will have made their salvation certain. As the Church sings, it was by this means that Saint John the Baptist was able to preserve himself free from the slightest sins.

In the same way you will return to the grace of our Lord and, according to Saint Peter, you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit,¹² who will make you firm in goodness, thanks to his dwelling in you. This Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus Christ. Beg him to establish your heart so firmly in good that on the day of his coming, as Saint Peter says, you may be found pure and irreproachable in his eyes.¹³ Take care that when he comes, he will not address to you the same reproach that Saint John in the Apocalypse made to a bishop, telling you that you have fallen away from your first charity.¹⁴ If he upbraids you with this now, remember the state from which you have fallen, as this bishop was enjoined to do. Do penance, and return to the practice of your first works.¹⁵

1. Lk 3:3

2. Ps 6:7

3. Jl 2:12

4. Ps 51:4

5. Lk 3:3

6. Acts 3:19

7. Ez 18:21–22; 33:16

8. Acts 2:38

9. Jon 3:1–10

10. Ez 18:21–22

11. 2 Pt 3:14

12. Acts 2:38

13. 2 Pt 3:14

14. Rev 2:4

15. Rev 2:5