

St. GASPAR BERTONI



FOUNDER of the CONGREGATION of the
SACRED STIGMATA of OUR LORD,
JESUS CHRIST

SOME RUDIMENTS
of his

SPIRITUAL WRITINGS

LENTEN SEASON

Part 2 [## 49 - 96]

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TABLE of CONTENTS

Author's Dedication

Letter of + Mariano A. Magrassi, OSB – Arch-Bishop of Bari

Acknowledgments for English Translation

Preparation for Electronic Library

+

INTRODUCTION

FOREWORD: The Sources

+

PART I

ADVENT and CHRISTMAS

Waiting for Christ

The Christian Ideal

Life of Grace

Temples of God

God with us

Christian Newness

The Following of Christ

Spousal Love

Christian Joy

+

PART II

LENT

Penance

Penance & Charity

Penance & Prayer

Sin

Tepidity

Temptation

Conversion

Sacramental Penance

In the School of Christ Crucified

+

PART III

EASTER

Easter of the Lord

Our Easter

The Eucharist – The Eternal Easter

The Life of Faith

Love God above all things

Abandonment in God

Fraternal Charity

The Spirit of Love

+

PART IV
ORDINARY TIME of the YEAR
A. GENERAL THEMES

The Church
 The Word of God
 Liturgy
 The Roman Pontiff
 Priests
 The Religious Community
 The Laity in the Church
 Vocation to Ministry of the Church
 Corresponding with Grace
 The Fear of the Lord

B. RELIGIOUS PRACTICES

Prayer & Prayers
 Meditation
 Examination of Conscience
 Spiritual Exercises
 Spiritual Direction
 Christian Prudence
 Humility
 Poverty
 Purity
 Authority & Obedience

C. RELIGIOUS COMMITMENT

Making the Best Use of Time
 Study & Learning
 The Wisdom of the Cross
 The Apostolic Mission
 Preaching
 Apostolic Undertakings
 Perseverance
 The Last Things

+

PART V
SPECIAL THEMES - Fr. BERTONI's DEVOTIONS

The Sacred Heart
 The Stigmata of the Passion
 Espousals of the Virgin Mary and St. Joseph
 Our Lady
 St. Joseph
 Some Liturgical Feasts

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AUTHOR'S DEDICATION

To my Stigmatine Confreres:

Fr. Samuel Chameal, Fr. Julius Delmaso, Fr. Lucian Orlando Giovanni,
Fr. Peter Marchesini, Fr. Guido Mespilli, Fr. Camillo Santini,
Fr. Louis Veronese –

Remembering our 50th anniversary as Priests - and in memory of:
Fr. Lucian DalZoppo and Fr. Seraphin Piazzzi – who have preceded us in the Father's
House.

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**U.S. PROVINCE
ACKNOWLEDGMENT for the ENGLISH TRANSLATION**

For the translation of this book:

Fr. Charles F. Egan, Fr. Charles J. Grady, Fr. Carmen T. Russo,
Fr. Giancarlo Mittempergher, Fr. Leonard Ferrecchia.
For the Final Revision: Fr. John Rungruangkanokul.

Our gratitude goes to each one for making these writings of our Saintly Founder
available in the English Language.

May these thoughts of our Founder be a guide in our following his footsteps towards a
true spiritual Stigmatine charism.

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PREPARATION for the ELECTRONIC LIBRARY & COMPUTER NOTES

Fr. Joseph Henchey.

[The material has been arranged in such a way for it to be of help for those who might
want to down-load – and there may be references as well to e material already found
on the web site]:

www.st-bertoni.com

[NB: The original title of this work in Italian is: *La Grammatica di Don Gaspare. Meditazioni quotidiane, dagli scritti di S. Gaspare Bertoni.*

In the English speaking world, this unusual title might lead some to think of Cardinal Newman's Grammar of Assent, published in 1870 ¹. In the Introduction, Gilson writes:

... [Newman's] Essay does not pretend to elucidate all the problems raised by [his] complex experience, but it is an attempt to facilitate for others their first initiation to the Grammar of a Language, which he himself had not found easy to learn ... Literally speaking, a Grammar is an art and science dealing with the structure of a certain language ... The first duty of a grammarian is to teach the parts of speech

In seeking to be faithful to Fr. Bonetti's idea, this *Grammar* could mean the 'Fundamentals,' 'Basic Elements and Principles,' of Fr. Bertoni's Spirituality – this is a kind of an 'anthology.' I have chosen the title for the web-site English edition: Some Rudiments of [Fr. Bertoni's] Spiritual Writings].

[NB: These reflections for the Lenten Season were edited for the Electronic Library during my preparation for a Parish Mission for the Cathedral Parish, St. John the Evangelist, Lafayette Louisiana, *Laetare Sunday* Week, March 2005.]

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¹ Doubleday Image Books. Garden City NY 1955, with Introduction by Etienne Gilson.

PRESENTATION

It is frequent today to select special pages from an Author of a certain interest, assigning them to each day of the year, and harmonizing the choices with the spiritual climate of the various liturgical seasons.

This is precisely what Fr. Ignatius Bonetti has done with an intelligence moved by love, in this present volume. He has been a truly dedicated student of St. Gaspar Bertoni [1777-1853]. The ancients used to say: 'I fear the man of just one book!' The person who knows only one book however, can incite both respect and fear. Today the style is to devour books reviews and newspapers, with the style of using them, and then throwing them away. The end result is to hurry through the content of the texts rather superficially, and then forgetting all about them after some time. This may provide information, but does not help formation. However, one has spent a life time in fathoming the depths of the message of a single Author is in a position to offer you the most important pages, because he would be able to provide these for you to sip and relish, as is done for truly good wine. Rather than just wandering through time, this work is much like the old Latin saying: 'Don't ever let a day pass without at least a line!' Let no day pass without meditating on a text. This is truly what Fr. Ignatius has done here, by drawing on St. Gaspar Bertoni, from whom the Congregation of the Stigmatines has taken its origin.

I am very happy to present these pages, due to the personal knowledge that I enjoy that binds me to the author, and to his Congregation, present in the Diocese of Bari, where the men work with great dynamism.

The content of this book cannot be summarized in just a few well-chosen lines. However, I will be satisfied with just a few references, in order to move the reader to a more direct and prolonged contact with the texts being offered here, day by day, 'redeeming time'. As Paul said, and which was repeated by St. Gaspar, by making the good use of time which does not return again.

Whoever would run through even rapidly the titles of the individual pages would see unfolding a very rich gamut of spiritual themes: through Grace that allows us to be 'participants in the Divine Nature', to Joy: by passing through the austere path of penance. All the Christian virtues are touched upon, as the various cords of a harp, and the end result is a harmonious poem, in which Jesus Christ is chanted.

In Advent, as would be expected, the theme of expectancy of Christ dominates, and the yearning for holiness; while in Lent, there emerges the theme of Penance and the sense of sin, which lead to the feet of the Crucified. As is seen, this is not a contemplation that would move only on the emotional or sentimental level – rather this work provides a stimulus that shuffles all the cards of our lives.

In the Ordinary Time, the themes are broadened with a greater variety. This proceeds from the Liturgy, to the Church with her various subjects, through the Christian virtues, in order to blossom in the 'devotions' that were the more

characteristic of our Saint: the sacred Heart, the Stigmata of the Lord, the Blessed Mother and St. Joseph, seen particularly in the light of their Holy Espousals. The Holy Spouses have drawn in a particular manner the devout attention of St. Gaspar. This was proved to be what moved him to choose them as Patrons for his Congregation and propose them as model for the Christian life, especially for families.

I would like to bring out a few characteristic expressions that seem to me to be most significant: *to trust in God is a beautiful confidence!* This is the vibrant and convinced manifestation of a joyful and boundless trust, even to the complete abandonment into the hands of the Father. God is one Who never deludes you. Holy Abandonment is one of the fundamental components of Fr. Gaspar's spiritual teaching: that he was able to translate into a coherent life-style.

Fraternal Charity is looked upon as 'the best investment', i.e., the best manner for procuring your authentic interest, not only for a few days here on earth, but rather as that destiny that will know no end. 'I have only that which I have given' – is then noted thereafter.

And I also emphasize further the praise bestowed on 'simplicity', a virtue which merits, in my view, a particular attention: it is a matter of evaluating the most ordinary circumstances of life, without awaiting extraordinary interventions that are so rare, and of modeling oneself on an child, who receives all with simplicity and festively, because for such a person everything is new. And it is to the children such as these to whom Jesus has promised His Reign.

Fundamental in this teaching is that 'conformity to Christ Crucified', that recurs throughout the Saint's writings, as the source of his spirituality. To go to partake of these texts is like partaking of the pure waters of a mountain stream.

St. Gaspar participated personally in the Passion of Christ, by suffering in his own flesh and spirit for long years. As a result, he insistently invites all of us to contemplate in the wounds of Christ Crucified, the indelible signs of an indescribable suffering. These are also an indication of a boundless love, the price paid by Christ in order to acquire us for His Reign.

Rather than commenting on our own, I would like to explain to you, the reader, how this stream of spirituality has sprung up in the Church. Up until the 12th century, Christ on the Cross was figured as being crowned in glory, or as a priest vested in rich vestments: He was presented to be already Christ the Victor over sin and death. In this perspective, attention to His Passion, to the Stigmata, to the Pierced Heart, to His Precious Blood that was poured out, found very little space. The glory of the resurrection seemed to absorb the drama of the Passion.

However, beginning in the 12th century, especially in Cistercian circles. Then taken by the Franciscans, a way was opened up for a new manner of spiritual thought – which then became known as '*Modern Devotion*'. This was more attentive to Savior's humanity, and to the signs of His Passion. This would then be the root of the devotion

– that is by now, classical – to the Sacred Heart. And from this developed devotion to the Most Precious Blood and to the Sacred Stigmata.

It is up to us today to bring together these two aspects: the Passion of the Crucified and the glory of the Risen Christ. These cannot be separated, much like the concave cannot be separated from the convex: Jesus is at one and the same time the 'Suffering Christ' and Christ the Victor: *through the Cross out into Light*, as the ancients also stated.

As for the rest, I leave it all up to your discovery. This will be much assisted also by the rich Table of Contents and Analytical Index, which will allow you to excavate from within the texts themselves. It is a beautiful opportunity to follow along in a spiritual adventure. This is a journey that is full of fascination. The poor realities of this world – as St. Ignatius of Loyola noted – seem to provide for the moment a great pleasure. But when in exhaustion, you abandon them, you find yourself empty and disillusioned. When, though, you undertake the adventure along the ways of the spirit, then the joy that is ignited for the moment, continues even afterwards, and even tends to become greater and more intense. Just try it to believe it! And, so, have a good journey along the paths of the Gospel, under the guidance of a saint, who precedes you and leads you by the hand.

+ Mariano A. Magrassi, OSB
Archbishop of Bari-Bitonto

INTRODUCTION

Gaspar Bertoni is one of those saints who are noted not only for the perfection of their spiritual life, but also for the fact that they were chosen by the Lord to be teachers of holiness in His Church.

He was to carry out his spiritual teaching with various classes of people – with people who listen to his sermons, with the youth of the 'Marian Oratories', with the clerics of the seminary, and the priests of the diocese, with the religious men and women of various congregations, and above all with the members of the congregation he founded.

It was natural that these latter, who were the privileged chosen ones of the activity of St. Gaspar, should understand with greater clarity the meaning and the value of his teaching and to be aware of the need to give faithfully the practical application. The chronicles of the congregation clearly point out the zealous attention with which the sons of St. Gaspar used to follow faithfully the directions of their Founder, as expressed in his words and his example. 'Fr. Gaspar,' writes Fr. Giovanni M. Marani, the first successor chosen to lead the congregation used to repeat often in his Venetian dialect, 'acted in this way, or he taught us this.'² Whenever he had to speak regarding the activity of someone who was not toeing the mark, Fr. Marani would use this good-natured expression: 'My son, you lack the **grammar** of Fr. Gaspar!'³

We see then that Fr. Gaspar, so to say, had his own **grammar**. Obviously, we are not speaking of a book, but rather of his spirit, his style of life, of a collection of his teaching and behavior, which by word and example had the power to convey to whoever came in contact with him a safe rule to follow on the road of holiness. With this colorful expression, which reflects the scholastic surrounding to which the community of the Stimmate lived for so many years, Fr. Marani clearly pointed out the 'teacher's' flavor of the spiritual personality of St. Gaspar.

The purpose of this book is to present the **grammar** of St. Gaspar, hence, the title.

First of all, it is an anthology of his writings. Some are of the sermons he gave to parishioners, others are meditations and instructions taken from the many courses of spiritual exercises and retreats that he gave to the clergy or to various groups of seminarians; writings from his spiritual diary, or spiritual journal; from his correspondence, from the constitutions he wrote for his religious family. We have included other selections, which were not composed by him, but in a certain sense he made them his own, transcribing them from other authors, such as Fr. Alphonsus Rodriguez, and the Benedictine, Fr. John Mabillion, and are included in his manuscripts.

² **Cause of Canonization, *Positio super virtutibus*, Vol. 2. Roma 1960, p. 22.**

³ Fr. Joseph Stofella, ***P. Giovanni M. Marani*. CS II, p. 124.**

Regarding the literary ownership of the texts in this collection, at this point, a general observation should be made. The greater part of the passages are definitely original and properly, St. Gaspar's. But, we cannot ignore the fact that he himself stated this intention 'of not saying anything of his own'⁴ regarding the meditations that he gave in the seminary and during the spiritual exercises, but to rely completely on the Bible, on the fathers of the Church, on the theologians and spiritual writers, so much so that the meditations and instructions of St. Gaspar are to a great extent a collection of other people's writings. Even in his sermons to the people he made use of the writings of the best classical preachers especially those of the Jesuit, Fr. Paul Segneri. From the innumerable citations quoted from other authors, especially those from the Fathers of the Church, as a general rule St. Gaspar mentioned the sources. But this was not always the case, for sometimes the citations appear to be fitted to the meaning he has in mind. However, we have adopted the criterion of indicating here, as pertaining to the ***Grammar of St. Gaspar***, the texts, that are found in his manuscripts, even those from various sources.

Besides the texts that in some way belong to St. Gaspar included in the ***grammar***, are some testimonies given about him by his contemporaries, that are more organized and incisive, and they point out to us the master of holiness, who taught with his own example besides his words. We have also taken the liberty to include a few other selections written by some of the first sons of St. Gaspar, who were very faithful to his teaching and close to his spirit. They are sermons given when they were substituting for him on themes that are dear to the spiritual tradition of our Stigmatine family - themes, such as the Sacred Stigmata, the Holy Spouses, Mary and Joseph, themes which St. Gaspar spoke about many times, but left nothing written of these sermons.

The subject matter of this ***Grammar of St. Gaspar*** has been distributed into various sections according to the season of the liturgical year. This should serve as a book of meditation. The first part corresponds to Advent and Christmas. In the second part you will find selections attuned to the spirit of the Lenten season. In the third part the same goes for the Easter Season. The texts that touch on themes of a general nature are found in the fourth part, which corresponds to Ordinary Time, hence, this part is a bit longer.

The fifth part is made up of selective themes on various topics, some suggested by festivities in the calendar year, others presented for the choice of the reader, who can use them when and how he chooses. Thus the span of the liturgical year is covered – even though this is accomplished with a bit of liberty and without any rigidity – with the texts of the daily meditations drawn from the ***Grammar of St. Gaspar***.

One final word about the criteria necessary to follow in the entire course of this work. From the onset, we decided not to do a critical edition of St. Gaspar's writings, but rather a practical edition, which would be useful in this day and age of the texts which were written almost two centuries ago and were never intended to be published.

⁴ *Meditations on St. Matthew*, MssB 7342. cf. further ahead, n. 8, note 2.

Hence, there arose the need to adapt a little the literary form of the writings, so to speak, a sort of 'translation.' But, let me make it clear that this was always done with careful respect for the texts, and with the sole purpose of rendering the contents more understandable today.

A cordial word of thanks to those who have helped me in various ways to bring this work to reality. In a special way, thanks to my confreres, Fr. Bruno Facciotti and Fr. Pasquale Cavallo, who encouraged me to have this ***Grammar of St. Gaspar*** published by the Dehonian Press of Bologna.

We hope that the spiritual teaching of St. Gaspar Bertoni, which is distinguished for being deeply rooted in the gospels, hence is perfectly suited for our time, will be favorably accepted by devout Christians, and will produce substantial results of holiness and missionary zeal.

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FORWARD

The identification of the texts in this book has been arranged with the following criterion:

For each meditation the source, or sources, are indicated, whenever several texts are combined with other closely related topics, their source is also identified. As far as possible, sources are identified as coming from the Bible, the Fathers, and others on which St. Gaspar relied.

For the writing of St. Gaspar that have been published in their entirety: ***Spiritual Journey, Correspondence, Constitutions*** - recourse is had to the various volumes that have been printed. Likewise, a collection of his Early Sermons has been published under the title, ***Pages of a Christian Life***. Reference to this book should be made as far as possible for the selections of these sermons. Also his ***Retreat Meditations*** and ***Instructions*** are printed in the **CS** collection, in an incomplete form and with a certain liberty in the translation. From time to time, we refer to this 'collection' when the occasion arises.

For testimonies about St. Gaspar, we refer to the documents, ***Positio super virtutibus***, and to the ***Summarium Additionale***, and to the monumental biography in six volumes written by Rev. Nello Dalle Vedove.

Below are the principal works on which the documentation is based with the dates, abbreviations and initials that area found in the footnotes.

- MssB** **Manuscripts** of St. Gaspar - 5 volumes, compiled by Fr. Luigi Benaglia
CF **Constitutions** – compiled by Fr. Joseph Stofella, Verona 1950.
EP **Correspondence** – Compiled by Fr. Joseph Stofella. Verona 1954.
MP **Spiritual Journal** - Commentary by Fr. Joseph Stofella, Roma 1962 – translated by from Giancarlo Mitterpergher. Pretoria 1993.
PVC **Pages of a Christian Life** – by Fr. Joseph Stofella. Vicenza 1947
CS **Collectanea Stigmatina** - 4 volumes, Documents & Studies. 1957-1964.
Positio super Virtutibus – Documents relating to the Process of Canonization
SA **Summarium Additionale** – Documents relating to the Process of Canonization

[NB: Among the Documents contained in the ***Summarium Additionale***, note worthy are the following:

- n. 20: ***Miscellanea Lenotti***. [pp.106 -195];
- n. 26: ***Life of the Servant of God. D. Gaspar Bertoni***. Verona 1858 [pp. 288-578], written by Fr. Gaetano Giacobbe. This is the first biography written about St. Gaspar.

BERTONI, *St. Gaspar Bertoni* - Written by Fr. Nello Dalle Vedove.

- **Vol. I: *Early Life of Ven. Gaspar Bertoni* – 1971.**
- **Vol. II: *Life and Thought of Bl. Gaspar Bertoni* - Part I 1975**
- **Vol. III: *Life and Thought of Bl. Gaspar Bertoni* - Part II 1977**
- **Vol. IV: *Gaspar Bertoni & the Stigmatine Community* – Part I 1981**
- **Vol. V: *Gaspar Bertoni & the Stigmatine Community* - Part II 1984**
- **Vol. VI: *Gaspar Bertoni & the Stigmatine Community* – Part III 1991**

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SEASON of LENT

PENANCE

49: Toward the Lenten fast with cheerfulness

Let us prepare our souls to accept with cheerfulness the Lenten fast and abstinence. This is an invitation that may seem a little strange; nonetheless, it is important that whatever is proposed to us by law be done by us with joyful promptness, as if by personal choice. And it will be this, if we don't allow ourselves to be convinced by appearances. But, if we reflect well on the reasons for things, with a tranquil mind, we shall then see that the Lenten fast and abstinence, together with the other penitential practices that accompany them, are among the most certain and powerful remedies to defend or recover spiritual well-being.

The case of Nineveh is a sufficiently convincing proof of the value and efficacy of these remedies. The situation of the city was so compromised that a prophet sent expressly by God had already predicted that within a short period of forty days the city would be buried under its ruins. But the inhabitants convinced themselves to seek a remedy for their sins by fasting, and then the situation changed. God was appeased and they obtained pardon.

In the Gospel it is related that the disciples one time turned to Jesus in sorrow, after having attempted to cast out the demons from a person who was possessed by them. Jesus gave us His answer the following reason: ***This type of demon is not cast out except through prayer and fasting.*** [Mt 17:21]. Even more, prayer itself, which is absolutely necessary, takes its power to operate from fasting. Prayer with fasting is a good thing [Tb 12:8]. In fact, fasting makes the mind nimble, prompt, free, and gives it wings to ascend to God.

Let us, therefore, put aside complaining that prayers return unanswered, and that temptations increase more every day, and that we don't know anymore to what means we should have recourse to free ourselves from our weaknesses. Let us keep well in mind that there, where even the most powerful exorcisms are appropriate medicine.⁵ Fast so that you may not sin. Fast because you have sinned. Fast so that you may receive the gifts of the Lord. Fast so that what you have received may remain with you.⁶

50: Medicine for the soul and also for the body.

The usefulness of fasting is not restricted to the sphere of the spirit, as if there remained for the body only that little bitterness and disagreeableness that the most effective medicines usually give. Fasting is a useful remedy, in fact a necessary one, even to keep the body healthy and prolong life. ***Through lack of self-control many have died, but the abstemious man prolongs his life*** [Si 37:31]. This is the way it is. That enjoyment, that delight between banqueting and drinking, that never knowing how to say 'no' to some satisfaction of the appetite, this is what weakens the body,

⁵ Early Sermons, n.16.

⁶ **Spiritual Journal.** March 10, 1810

corrupts it, and brings it to a premature death. While it is mortification, sobriety, and abstinence that keep it healthy and preserve it and makes it strong. If this is how things stand, and the Lenten fast is not only a useful remedy, but one necessary for the health of the soul and body, why shouldn't we greet it happily and full of joy?

We are Christians. By His example Christ has given us strength to accept this remedy with good will. He who for forty days kept such a strict fast. Let us consider the saints, how much they did, undertook and suffered for the health of their souls, Let us not imitate children who refuse the most effective medicines because they leave a bitter taste on the tongue.

With these thoughts let us direct our soul to greet holy Lent with much happiness, to the end that, well purified by means of fasting and abstinence, and adorned with solid virtues, we are made worthy to celebrate with good results the Easter of the Lord here on earth, and to be admitted afterwards to the eternal Easter in heaven⁷.

51: Indispensable condition for following Christ

Whoever wishes to come after Me must deny himself, take up his cross and follow Me [Mt 16:24]

Let him deny himself - this is the spirit of penance. The effect of this spirit is to change the whole man. On the outside by denying his own things, and by changing them, and this is the last difficult point. He denies by leaving himself, this is quite difficult. He leaves himself who stops living according to the old sensual life of Adam, and lives according to the new spiritual life of grace. This is realized because man is induced by such a spirit of penance to loathe what he formerly loved and to love instead what he formerly loathed. Actually, a good penitent, one who truly denies himself, is, for example, the person who once was intemperate has not become very abstemious, the person who formerly was subjected to impurity, now becomes very chaste; the person who was once stingy, now becomes exceedingly generous.

Let him take up his Cross. The true follower of Christ takes up his cross, not compelled as was Simon of Cyrene, but freely, totally spontaneous. Her drags it not only through a sense of duty, or as an imposition, resigning himself, and possibly even with reproaches and complaints, but with gratitude, and interior joy, while nourishing in himself the love of suffering for Christ.

And follow Me. It is the spirit of love to follow Christ. Each person can, according to his capacity, arrive at this summit, or at least to look at it with desire, so as to arrive there in his own time according to the divine plan.

These are the beginnings, the progress, the attainment of holiness⁸.

52: The three crosses

No one can pass through this life without a cross. We can choose from among three crosses. The first is that of Christ' the second is that of the good thief; and the third is that of the bad thief

⁷ Early Sermons, n. 16. The Lenten Fast. **MssB 748-754. PVC pp. 266-270**

⁸ Panegyric on St. Francis. **MssB 1845-1846; 1856; 1865.**

In the first, there is glory; it belongs to the innocent, those who most resemble Christ.

In the second there is consolation; this is proper to penitents, who by exercising patience do not lose resignation or peace.

Whoever does not choose one of these two crosses must necessarily take the third, that of the bad thief, who had to suffer more and without merit. His cross served him as a ladder to descend into the abyss of hell.⁹

Here on earth penance is short, light and useful. In hell, it will be extremely long, enormous and useless. He who does not repent in this life will have to repent uselessly in the next.¹⁰

Oh how the just soul, once it has entered glory, will bless the penance practiced on earth, so little to suffer, so much to rejoice. On the other hand, the condemned soul will curse its pleasures, its false friends, and the sins it has committed. ***What fools we were ... we had our fill of the ways of mischief and of ruin; we journeyed through impassable deserts, but the way of the Lord we knew not.*** [Ws 5:4-7]. One of these two destinies must affect us. What stupidity on the part of those who know this through faith, but do not care to make provisions while they are alive; in eternity, penitence does not help except to increase desperation¹¹.

53: Mortification

Do nothing unless for the glory of God and His holy love; this will make you despise the world and ban all vices.¹² We must wean ourselves from doing our own will and do everything as if moved by the will of God with the intention of pleasing and loving Him.¹³ Our mortification should be total, not leaving any passion alive voluntarily.¹⁴ When we act under the instinct of nature, even for a single moment, we prevent God from acting, and we give way to the activity of a creature¹⁵. 'I cannot', spoken by spiritual people in the matter of mortification sounds bad enough, because in God we can do everything. Some do not want to mortify themselves with the excuse that certain difficulties are 'crosses' sent from heaven. So, under a false pretext, they are complacent with their defects as if they were heaven's will¹⁶.

For the rest, we must not overburden ourselves with excessive penances and activities.¹⁷ Regarding penance, there should be only this universal rule for all the confreres: that in food, clothing, and other necessities of life, they should be content with whatever is distributed or granted to them by their superiors. Everyone will accept willingly whatever is distributed or granted to them by their superior will impose in the Lord; even more he should desire for more and ask often for more as far as his

⁹ **Spiritual Journal**. March 18, 1809.

¹⁰ o.c., March 15, 1809.

¹¹ **Spiritual Exercises** of 1806. **MssB 3891-3892**

¹² **Spiritual Journal**, July 14, 1809.

¹³ o.c., July 16, 1809.

¹⁴ o.c., May 2, 1809.

¹⁵ o.c., July 15, 1809.

¹⁶ o.c. August 31, 1808.

¹⁷ o.c., September 13, 1808.

strength and the grace of god suggests. It pertains to them to determine whether to permit or moderate them¹⁸.

Above all else those who lack interior mortification, and yet desire external mortification should be advised to refrain from the latter. In this way, they will be eager to develop the internal mortification as a compensation for not exercising external mortification¹⁹.

54: A great penitent: St. Francis

Let us consider the profound change that came about in the life of St. Francis of Assisi. He was a man who had been rich a short time before, with his eyes, hands, work bent on piling up riches in the business world. Now this same man suddenly goes to the door of a church, standing in the midst of a crowd of poor people, dressed as a poor man, in clothing he had received from a poor man, in exchange for his former rich clothes, and now he is all desire, all ardor, all zeal in search of poverty. But where did such a change of behavior come from? From a still more surprising change of feelings. ***Whatever gains I had, these I have considered a loss because of Christ*** [Ph 3:7].

Not this alone, but assisted by divine inspiration, the Saint still advanced and arrived at judging as loss, not only what formerly he esteemed as gain, that is, riches and pleasures and worldly renown, but all the other things that are not Christ, such as high position in society, eagerness of his genius, abundance of talents and other similar goods, always for the same reason, for Christ. Then the very strict mortification that St. Francis imposed on himself was most impressive: food was so scarce as hardly able to keep him alive, very little sleep, and that taken with his body stretched out on the ground after having become very tired by preaching, his body clothed in a poor habit, one intentionally rough which made him suffer both the cold weather and the warm, and tormented by hair shirts, flagellations and prolonged fasts.

To sum it up, Francis knew how to live his earthly life like a continual martyrdom, on the cross with Christ. ***The world has been crucified to me and I to the world.*** [Ga 6:14]. Truly, love never says: 'Enough!'²⁰

¹⁸ ***Original Constitutions 43-44.*** Fr. Gaspar had closely collaborated with other Founders – especially with Fr. Anthony Rosmini and Leopoldina Naudet – in the drawing up of the Rules for their respective Institutes. Around 1840, he dedicated himself to writing them for his own Institute. And he did it like a saint: putting prayer in the first place to obtain the light of the Holy Spirit. *Pray well for all of us, and for what I am writing, drop by drop...* he writes to Fr. Bragato on May 11, 1841 – *If the Lord wishes it and it turns to his honor* [[cf. **Correspondence**, p. 325]. For the juridical establishment, the Constitutions of Fr. Gaspar are inspired in large measure by the rules of the Jesuits. But the spiritual and ascetical component with which his legislative text is notable, is his [cf. **BERTONI**, 6, pp. 115, ff.

¹⁹ ***Spiritual Journal, September*** 28, 1808.

²⁰ Panegyric of St. Francis. **MssB 1847-1859.**

PENANCE AND CHARITY

55: Your fast becomes food for the poor

the most appropriate and characteristic feature of charity is this: ***It does not seek its own interests*** [1 Co 13:5] In fact, whoever loves someone with true friendship must always seek the benefit of his friend. But, the person who seeks in his friend his own benefit and pleasure, does not love his friend, but himself.

Which one of us is disposed not to give his life out of love for his neighbor, as the saints do, but to give freely the surplus of those riches which so often are squandered, to help his brother who sometimes languishes from hunger? It would not be other than the simple commandment! Who is one of them, then, who through zeal for the salvation of others takes care to ***help his neighbor according to his own possibility*** [Si 29:27] with the discreet use of fraternal correction, at least by good example and prayer? It would not be anything else, without by any means surpassing it, than the rigorous precept with which God ***has charged each one of us to the care of our neighbor*** [Si 17:12].

Let us therefore move forward. Let us propose to ourselves, insofar as these charges oblige us by precept, to begin living that charity which is principally characterized by the fact that we do not seek our own good, but whatever is useful for our neighbor²¹.

56: Charity involves sacrifice

Charity requires that I know how to rejoice with those who are joyful and to weep with those who weep [Rm 12:15]. But isn't it true that I have offended charity and, perhaps, continue to offend it? I pretend that it is shown to me, but up to what point do I put it into practice toward persons to whom, for many reason, I am in debt?

Instead of doing to others all the good that is in me, perhaps I envy what is done for them, and perhaps on certain occasions I tend to oppose them, and become an obstacle to them. Instead of foreseeing their needs and helping them even in matters that are not strictly demanded by duty, it may have occurred to me to become quite difficult in the exercise of my office in granting that which is owed. Instead of getting involved with those who are troubled, have I not perhaps sometimes reached the point in showing a sort of malicious happiness, or has it happened that I myself became the motive for it?

Jesus Christ has expressly pointed out that we shall be treated by his Father just as we have treated His and our brothers. According to this measure, what can I hope from God, and with what assurance could I ask Him to bestow on me the abundance of His graces?²²

²¹ Early Sermons, n. i6.

²² Parish Mission at St. Firmo Major. **MssB 4217-4221**. In the month of May 1816, from the 4th- 26th, there took place in the central church of St Firmo Major, the preaching of a great parish, city-wide Mission, under the direction of the celebrated Apostolic Missionary, Canon Louis Pacetti [1761-1819]. Fr. Gaspar had the duty of presenting a daily meditation. 'Due to his preaching,' attests his contemporary, Fr. Camillo Bresciani, 'he was considered equal to the

57: The demands of fraternal charity

Charity, says St. Paul, in the first place is patient to endure the defects of one's neighbor. It is kind to win for Christ the souls of others with gentleness. Longing for their eternal salvation and every good thing, it does not envy at all their prosperity. In order not to give them any obstacle on their way to salvation, precaution is taken lest it does anything wrong. It does not boast of any talent of mind or body, and it absolutely avoids belittling others. Furthermore, to serve them devotedly it is solicitous for their advantage and does not seek its own interests. When provoked by insults, it is not irritated, and does not take vengeance. It thinks no evil of anyone, but interprets everything in the best way, keeping to the truth, and only seeks correction. Crying over the sins of its neighbors, as though its own, it does not rejoice in injustice, takes pleasure in truth and rejoices in the virtues of others.

Finally, charity covers everything, believes everything, hopes for everything, and supports everything for the love of others, when it is a matter of doing that is truly good for them, knowing how to do that with great pleasure to God for the love of Whom it is gently pushed to love others [1 Co 13:4-7].²³

PENANCE AND PRAYER**58: My God and my All!**

To You I lift up my eyes, Who are enthroned in heaven. Behold, as the eyes of servants are on the hands of their masters, as the eyes of a maid are on the hands of her mistress, so are our eyes on the Lord, our God, till He have pity on us [Ps 123:1-2]. Let us not take our eyes from the Lord, but continue our prayer uninterruptedly until with grace and mercy He has granted us that understanding which we need.

Have pity on us, O Lord, have pity on us, for we are more than sated with contempt [v. 3]. Let us realize that our defects, imperfections, and failings that make us more worthy of mockery and contempt in our own eyes [for the little we know of ourselves] are, in the eyes of God who sees everything, presented as a most convincing reason to His heart to grant us grace and mercy. 'For we are more than sated with contempt.' This is the prayer of a truly generous soul, which conquers and forces the heart of God. This is truly to lift God up so much. To sum it up, it is prayer worthy of one who has a heart made according to the heart of God, like the heart of David.

Roman Apostolic Missionary, Pacetti, who was already worn out by giving Missions. Fr. Gaspar was equal to Pacetti in the polish of his expositions, and he surpassed him in smoothness and in persuading the audience to put into effect the proposed reform' [cf. **BERTONI**, 3, p. 675]. His biographers emphasize the great value this experience had for Fr. Gaspar's life and for the plan of the Congregation. Having received the title 'Apostolic Missionary', he later proposed as the end of his Congregation, ***Apostolic Missionaries at the service of Bishops*** [CF # 1; **BERTONI** 4, pp. 99f,].

²³ Early Sermons, n. 6. 'Charity towards one's neighbor'. **MssB 527-528. PVC pp. 175, f.**

O great God! How good You have been and condescending for the love of us miserable creatures! When will it come about that we love you with all our heart, and know You, and hold You for what You are! My God and my All! [*Imitation of Christ*, Book 3, c. 34]²⁴.

59: The one thing necessary

Our Lord assures us that only one thing is necessary. ***There is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part [that is, to attend only to this thing], and it will not be taken from her [Lk 10:42]*** all the rest in fact are nothing more than trifles.

It seems that the Lord is acting like certain gentlemen of this world who keep for themselves the most important business, while leaving the administration of domestic matters to the prudent supervision of their wives, and they don't want to hear a word about this. In fact, at the first hint about this, they are quick to say 'you do it, you do it and all will be done well.'

In fact, this is what our Lord aims at in His provident care: to make us live spiritually, to spiritualize everything so that we don't take into account everything that falls under the senses, and raising ourselves above everything, we love so much in Him and surrender to His infinite goodness and mercy, that we need to remove ourselves from this no matter what happens and mercy, that we need not remove ourselves from this no matter what happens here below. This is our better good, and with this, the Lord fully concerns Himself, using every care. His goods which are then those which we have offered and consecrated to Him, He leaves us to administer with our meager prudence, as it were, He doesn't want to hear a word about them.

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today [Heb 13:3]. Yesterday, He informed us and directed us to suffer with courage, and today He gives us the courage and the patience necessary to support every trial for His glory. ***I will bless the Lord at all times; His praise shall ever be in my mouth. [Ps 34:2]***²⁵.

60: Distractions, temptations and dryness.

If we are bothered by distractions in our prayers and meditation, we should not be discouraged and give up praying, but we must persevere just the same. Let us keep ourselves in the presence of God notwithstanding our distractions, and because of this let us not reduce the time designated for prayer. We must be able to recognize and humbly to offer to God in prayer our miserable condition which does not allow us to lift up our heart to God perfectly as we would like to, and to say with the Psalmist: ***My heart fails me. Deign, o Lord, to rescue me. O Lord, make haste to help me. [Ps 40:13-14]***.

Even the devil does all he can to disturb souls that pray. But we, while assaulted by temptation, shall persist in our holy desire and endeavors, certain that our desire and endeavors will be put into account of the fruit of prayer. Even if we do

²⁴ **Correspondence.** P. 45-47. Letter to L. Naudet, written at the end of 1812, or the beginning of 1813.

²⁵ **Correspondence.** P. 48. Letter to Naudet, January 9, 1813.

not succeed in freeing ourselves completely from the annoying thoughts instigated by the Tempter, nonetheless we shall receive from God the reward of those endeavors; in fact, if one does not consent to the temptation, straightaway an advantage will be obtained from that trouble.

It can also happen that in praying and meditating we do not experience any relish and taste of devotion and suffer from interior dryness. If, however, we maintain ourselves equally faithful to the practices of piety, seeking on our part to complete them in the best way possible, we can rely on the goodness of the Lord who accepts them with kindness. The Lord is especially pleased with that service which His elect offer Him at their own expense²⁶.

SIN

61: Grace and sin

Who are we Christians? Let us not look around, inside and outside ourselves. Let us enter into our most sublime being.

By nature we are a very clear image of the divine countenance. We are the lords appointed by God so that all creatures will serve us. The very heavens, with the splendor of their light, are destined to serve us.

Then by grace we have been elevated to the same order of the divine nature, in which we participate. We are sons of God. Christ is our Brother. We have been declared God's heirs. Our souls are spouses of the Holy Spirit. Has He not given them an exceedingly rich deposit of precious gifts? Were not the angels, princes of heaven, destined to guard them here on earth? What more? Has not the very Son of God descended from heaven, putting on our nature to live with us?

Shall we not then look back with indifferent eyes and with a calm spirit at these lords of earth, these heirs of heaven sons of God and spouses of the Holy Spirit, subjecting themselves to the shameful slavery of sin and of the devil? Shall we not blush in the face of such unworthy slavery? Where is the noble and gentle character of our spirit? And for how long will we remain vilified by these chains, accepting that these monstrous tyrants should rule over us?

Let us think seriously how to recover our liberty, our authority and our glory²⁷.

62: The offense to God

Because sin is an offense against the infinite majesty of God, it possesses a certain infinity of evil and such an abyss of deformity that it cannot be amended adequately by an act of submissiveness on the part of any creature. Since we creatures were unable to pay this incalculable debt, the Lord came to pay it, and having become man, He wishes to take upon Himself, through an excess of love, the satisfaction of such a burden, for which an infinite treasure of merits was necessary. Even more, we know that, strictly speaking, to do this, a mere sigh that Christ, the

²⁶ **Retreat Meditations. MssB 3420-3422.**

²⁷ **Early Sermons, n. 23. Freedom from sin and the Devil. MssB 901-903; 913. PVC pp. 33-36.**

God-man, would have sent to Heaven, would have been sufficient. But, to make us see His aversion to sin better, and to urge us to perceive the gravity of evil by the price of His medicine, He loaded on Himself so many external and internal sorrows that no human mind exists which is capable of fully understanding them.

Let us contemplate the Crucified Christ, tormented in all His members and in all His senses by every sort of people, He Who had a Body so delicate and sensitive. One should say that the life of Christ could not endure such suffering. Yet He did it so as to suffer the more. He Who has performed so many miracles to lessen the sufferings of others!

Sin is, therefore, not an empty evil like a pastime. When we do we return to crucify Christ: because to wish to compensate the offense according to strict justice, a satisfaction no less than that offered on Calvary is needed. An attempt is made to nullify, on the part of the sinner, the force of Jesus' Passion and make it inefficacious in the order of salvation²⁸.

Whoever wants to know what sin really is should put himself before the Crucifix and learn what it really is²⁹.

63: The death of the soul

Just as the soul is the life of the body, so God, through grace, is the life of the soul. **He is your life** [Dt 30:20]. And just as the body dies if the soul leaves it, so also the soul dies if by mortal sin god is put at a distance by it.

Let us for a while consider more closely the reality of this death. Life is mostly manifested by movement and activity. Now what does the soul in sin to gain merit in the supernatural order? And how does it move itself on the road that leads to the goal of eternal happiness? Sin eliminates even the ability to operate in the order of grace, and therefore also the right to all merit, because everything is done without God. St. Augustine says: 'Just as the soul as long as it is in the body gives it vigor, beauty, movement and the functioning of the various members, likewise as long as God is in the soul, He confers on it wisdom, piety, justice and charity³⁰, which is the root of merit. St. Paul says: **If I give away everything I own, and if I hand my body over so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing** [1 Co 13:3].

In addition to this, let us reflect on the fact that sin directs us step after step to a second death, which is even more tragic, that is, to lose eternal life for which man was

²⁸ Mission at St. Firmo Major. **MssB 4104-4107.**

²⁹ **Early Sermons**, n. 4. 'The Passion'. **MssB 497. PVC p. 288.** Fr. Gaspar preached twice on the Passion on Good Friday evening. The first was on April 3 1801 – and the second, with the same text a little more developed, on April 4, 1806.

Among the sermons preached in his early years in the priesthood, it is presented as one of the better prepared, and can be considered also as a document of that wisdom of the Cross characteristic of Fr. Gaspar, which was testified by his biographer, Fr. Gaetano Giacobbe: '.. Regardless of how much he knew, he never wished that it deviate from the sublime wisdom of knowing his Crucified Lord..' [cf. **SA**, p. 518]. [cf. elsewhere in the **GRAMMAR nn 87-96; 292-300.**

³⁰ St. Augustine, *Tractatus in Ioannem*. 19, 12. PL 35, 1550, etc.

created, and to bury him in *Gehenna*, in the inextinguishable fire [Mk 9:43], **where there will be wailing and gnashing of teeth** [Mt 8:12].

A most unhappy situation is that of those who live in sin. The soul is dead. Who can raise it up? It is furthermore condemned to eternal death!³¹

64: Consequences of sin

Who brought into the world all the evils that triumph here? The sin of Adam. **God made man straight** [Qo 7:29], master of himself and the other creatures, and man, by rebelling most foolishly against God, lost his peaceful dominion over them. Therefore, if sin, right from the start, was that traitor which plundered the world in its beginning, putting itself, as it were, at the head of that numberless army of disasters which afflict it, it is logical to think that afterwards it is still the same sin to introduce every evil thing in our homes. Actual sin produces proportionally in individuals the same effects that original sin produced in the human race. This is, therefore, the true source of all our evils, although people take every measure to return to the sources of this murky Nile that floods us with fullness of anguish.

Naturally, with this, one would not want to say that there is an immediate relation between individual sins and our sufferings. The harm that sin immediately produces is the loss of spiritual goods. In effect, it takes away sanctifying grace, which is the life of the soul, and along with grace, it takes away the infused virtues, the merit of good works accomplished, and the right to eternal life. It indeed takes away calmness and peace, leaving behind a cruel remorse which poisons every joy of the sinner. At any rate, it remains true that virtue **exalts a nation, but sin is a people's disgrace** [Pr 14:34]. In a crowd it is not the one who collides with us most; it is those at a distance that push us to make room for themselves. Sins give the shove to many great evils, and just as they have turned upside down other times, people and places, they have even more the effect of putting a house upside down. Let us introduce piety into a house, and we shall introduce every good thing. Let us throw out sin and we shall throw out of it every evil³².

65: The struggle against sin.

My son, if you have sinned, do so no more, and for your past sins pray to be forgiven [Si 21:1].

If you have fallen into sin, which is like a mortal wound for your soul, the first remedy necessary for salvation is the pledge not to do it again. Because, unfortunately, there are many who, when they have committed a sin, despair for their loss of innocence and grace, and allow themselves to embrace every kind of transgressions and turn back in the mire of intemperate pleasures.

Do so no more - both because the repetition of sin is a new wound of the soul, and whoever has received a wound takes good care not to get another, and because it's easier to cure one single sin than two or three or even more, just as it is easier to cure a single wound than many; likewise, because in the repetition of the sin, there is

³¹ Early Sermons, n. 33. 'The sweetest benefit of Penance'. **MssB 1196-1200.**

³² Mission at St. Firmo Major. **MssB 4109-4131.**

obstinate pride and lust of spirit that offends God grievously and makes more difficult both the cure of the one who has fallen and the pardon of his fault.

Pray for the faults committed, so that they may be pardoned. This too is necessary in order to remedy sin. It is not enough to obtain pardon, but also not to sin again and to correct one's conduct of life, just as if penitence were not anything else than a simple coming to one's senses. There is also need to repent, and to beg pardon with sorrow and humility. The sins in fact remain unless they are pardoned³³.

66: Deliberate venial sin

With reference to the soul of one who has committed venial sin, it is like a blemish which certainly does not take away the intrinsic beauty of sanctifying grace; however, it does take away its splendor. And if we think how beautiful a soul is in grace, how can we consider lightly any lessening of such splendor?

Venial sin, then, is opposed to the will of God. While it is still not contrary to the end of the law, which is charity, it does not keep that same law with the perfection owed it, and as such it dilutes the fervor of charity. An evil that is opposed to the perfect completion of God's plan certainly cannot be called a slight evil. Our Lord did not consider it such. He offered to the Divine Majesty His torments, His Blood, and His death, not only in reparation for the mortal sins of all mankind, but in reparation also for venial sins.

In addition, venial sin is not of little importance, but very significant for its effects. The most dangerous effect of venial sin is that it disposes one to mortal sin. It disposes indirectly by removing the defenses and by taking away the embankments that hold back the flood of evil, thus mitigating the exercise of virtue, and accustoming the will to oppose the Divine Will in small matters, which is like a slide that brings one eventually to more serious infractions. But venial sin also disposes us to mortal sin directly, in so far as that with it, we put such attachment to vain matters, so that, not to abandon that which is vain, we arrive at doing also that which is effectively wicked. This is seen above all in certain cases in which venial sin has the same matter as mortal sin, and differs from it only in quantity; as, for example, in theft and slander. To sum up: venial sin is often distinguished from mortal sin only in something small from the large. It is a spark, but if the devil succeeds in blowing on it, there isn't any fire that can't be kindled by it³⁴.

TEPIDITY

67: The ailment and its remedies

I have not found your works complete in the sight of God [Rv 3:2] – works devoid of spirit, charity and zeal. You are like a tree in bloom, but sterile [Mk 1:13, ff.] that has the appearance of piety but not its fruits and works. You are not constant in persevering in accomplishing good. If you do some good work, you do not perform it

³³ Retreat Meditations. **MssB 2994-2997.**

³⁴ Mission at St. Firmo Major. **MssB 4134-4148.**

with the right intention, but through self-interest or vainglory, with sloth and tiredness, polluting it even with certain acts of behavior that cannot be recommended.

A little for God, a little for the devil; a little for Christ, a little for the world; a little for the flesh, and little spirit; a little vanity, a little devotion; a little iniquity, a little charity; a few prayers, a few curses. The spirit of Christ becomes polluted by the mixture with the spirit of the world; faith with maxims of the world; Christian charity with an image of honesty that is simply pagan. Your works will even be able to appear good before your eyes and those of the world and men, but not in the eyes of God.

To overcome this state, apply yourself to listening to the word of God and try not to pay heed to the maxims of the world. Be faithful to solid tradition and to the teaching authority of the Church. Do not let yourself be seduced by false novelties. Overcome worldly respects and fear, and the distorted reasoning of a false philosophy, which is raised against the Church. Follow faithfully the humble teaching of Christ preached by the successor of St. Peter. Keep your eyes well open and don't fall a sleep or doze off. Do penance because there are many sins and great danger of sinning.

Whoever has ears ought to hear what the spirit says to the Churches [Rv. 3:6], not that which the flesh says, or the world, or the so-called philosophies, but the Spirit that rests on **the lowly and afflicted man who trembles at my word** [Is 66:2], and **withdraws from all pretense and hypocrisy** [Ws 1:5].³⁵

68: Would that you were not or cold!

To the angel of the Church of Laodicea, write this: I know your works [Rv 3:14-15], works that you do not know and have not wished to know them. I, therefore, shall show to you what they are, and not what your self-love makes them appear to you. You are neither cold nor hot [ibid.]. Whoever stands wavering between virtue and vice would like to live a holy life and flee from sins, but has not decided completely to fight generously, and he fears the effort of virtue. **Because you are lukewarm, neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth.** [ibid., v. 16].

Tepidity is more dangerous than the coldness of that sinner who is disposed to recognize his sin. Often we see the case of cold people and sinners who are converted and reach levels of true spiritual fervor, something that is not seen in those who live in lukewarmness. The negligence of the tepid soul and the false peace in which it lives, being joined together, result in falling from that drowsiness into mortal lethargy. After all, lukewarmness shows itself in a certain sense more dangerous than the coldness of sin, because it has its roots in the worst of all vices, that is pride and presumption. You say: 'I am rich and affluent and have no need of anything' [ibid. v. 17]. This is characteristic of the lukewarm: to confront themselves not with the Gospel, nor with the teaching and example of the saints, but with the worldly. **Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name and cast our devils in Your name and perform**

³⁵ Mission at St. Firmo Major. The Letter of God – MssB 4019-4027. This is a comment on Rv 3:1-6, that is, on the letter addressed to the *Angel of the Church of Sardi*. According to the last biographer of Bertoni, he established himself in the preaching of the Mission at St. Firmo Major [BERTONI 3, pp. 672, ff.].

many miracles in Your name? [Mt 7:22]. But, the Lord will answer: ***I never knew you; depart from Me, you evildoers*** [id. V. 23].

I advise you to buy from me gold refined by fire, and white garments to put on, and ointment to smear on your eyes [Rv 3:18]. Gold purified by fire is charity, burning and purified from every form of hypocrisy and contamination with human passions. The white clothes are innocence and purity of life. The ointment is humility which makes man see clearly his evil deeds and shows him the need of divine help and therefore the need to merit this help by means of a holy and fervent life³⁶.

TEMPTATION

69: How temptation comes

God allows it, and He always does it for a good end; that we are tempted to the spirit of evil, that is, from our own self-love, carnal or worldly, and by the devil.

We should keep in mind that ordinarily the evil spirit of the devil seeks to join with the human, carnal spirit within us, that is, with disordered love for pleasures, with worldly attraction for material possessions and honors with pride. And if he finds in that soul that he wishes to tempt a point of support, he undertakes a very dangerous internal war. However, if he does not find a sufficient point of support, since the soul seeks constantly to purify itself by collaborating with grace, then the evil one seeks accomplishes outside. And it seeks them preferably in those people who are closer to the soul being tempted, and often times in those to which the soul is bound by special bonds of friendship, confidence and even of obedience.

It can also happen, for example, to take a young man away from the intention to consecrate himself entirely to God, the evil one makes use of some priest of little fervor, a worldly man, whom the young man in all simplicity approaches to receive advice and orientation.

Lord, in these trials, You have a purpose, and the devil has one opposed to Yours. You have the intention of purifying our defects and making us correspond better to our vocation. The devil instead wants to make us fall into infidelity and know clearly the designs of Your loving Providence, and also to thwart the plots of the adversary, so that we may obtain that, even though these trials, our spirit reinforces its faithfulness to You and our resolution to correspond better to the vocation to which are called³⁷.

70: God knows how to draw advantages from temptations

If Divine Providence, which orders everything to our good, and permits the devil to tempt us, it also limits the power of the temptation, not allowing us to be tempted beyond our strength [cf. 1 Co 10:13], and besides furnishing us interior aids, it also disposes exterior defenses to the end that by cooperating with grace, we succeed in triumphing over it. Moreover, there is always the maternal vigilant care of the Church,

³⁶ Retreat Meditations. **MssB 3201-3216.**

³⁷ Meditations from *Primum Regum*, n. 11 and 12. **MssB 5186-5205.**

Spouse of Christ, which the Lord fills with zeal for the protection of her sons, and with light to guard them in the struggle. In fact, God with this same loving Providence and with the motherly care of the Church, thanks also to our cooperation, knows how to carry the experience of the temptation to a happy ending: ***With the trial, He will also provide a way out, so that you may be able to bear it*** [1 Co 10:13].

A first advantage of temptation is the strengthening of virtue, the acquisition of greater firmness in good, and the commitment and effort for a more perfect style of life that is truly pure. All this is reinforced by a strong exercise of mortification.

Another advantage is derived from the experience of temptation, and this is the knowledge of discretion. The soul already acquires this knowledge during the temptation itself by taking cognizance of its own strength, and determining the level of virtue acquired by examining it as if the touchstone. ***One never put to the proof knows little*** [Si 34:10].

There is still a third advantage derived from temptation. It is the fullness of consolation with which God accompanies the victory of the faithful soul, together with the fruit of good example which is offered to others. God then abundantly compensates for the fatigue experienced during temptation, even granting a special gift of humility and spiritual fervor³⁸.

71: Preparation for temptation

Those who sincerely seek God in their lives must know that their combat is a continual provocation for the malice of Leviathan [cf. Jb 3:8].

In fact, those who live in sin are subject to the will of the devil and are possessed by him as by a special right, and their proud sovereign dominates their hearts with undisputed power in peaceful security. But when the spirit is inflamed with the desire for God, when it abandons the drowsiness of its negligence, and, mindful of its inborn liberty, rebels against the slavery of the enemy, this same enemy feels despised and cannot tolerate the revolt of its slave against it. Then it ignites itself with anger and girds itself for the struggle. It places temptations of every kind against the rebel, and tries with all its offensive arms to pierce through that heart which for some time it felt it possessed by a peaceful right.

Thus the Leviathan, which seemed to be sleeping, as it were, when it rested in the heart of the sinner, now comes awake by the provocation to battle, having lost the peaceful right of its perverse domination. ***Son***, says Scripture, ***when you come to serve the Lord, prepare yourself for trials*** [Si 2:1]. Thus, made free, he must be disposed to undergo difficult blows in the struggle who served peacefully as a slave in prison under tyranny³⁹.

72: Practical suggestions

Flee from sin as from a serpent [Si 21:2]. If you had had the strength to resist, at this time temptations would be over⁴⁰.

³⁸ Meditations from *Primum Regum*, nn 11 and 12. MssB 5206; 5242-5265.

³⁹ Retreat Meditations. MssB 3000-3002.

⁴⁰ *Spiritual Journal*. July 29, 1809.

Temptations return if we have given in the first time because God wishes to give us the occasion to obtain that profit which we lost before⁴¹.

We have to prepare for greater temptations both to remedy defects committed and to arrive at where God wants us to arrive⁴².

Those who do not follow the inspirations God gives them to run away, and protect themselves from some danger, deserve to fall into it⁴³.

Great temptations are matter and means of great sanctity, provided we have courage and fortitude⁴⁴.

There are also certain temptations which are chased away by not taking them into account, even by making a show to yield to them, for example, if permission is granted to a good and fervent person who is tempted to leave his own Religious Institute, to enter a more austere one⁴⁵.

CONVERSION

73: The return of the Prodigal Son

Let us picture the prodigal son at the foot of an oak tree, while he is guarding a herd of swine which he looks at thoughtfully, weak from the lack of food, tattered and squalid, in the act of thinking about his return.

He is induced to return to his father's house first of all due to the feeling of his actual misery. He contrasts his past state with his present. He has been reduced from a rich man to a poor one and it took only a few months to reduce him to such poverty and misery, and he fell into evil. He is moved to return also by remorse and repentance for the faults he committed. In his heart he recalls the memory of the goodness of his father and he contrasts it with the unworthiness of his conduct.

Before starting out on his journey, the prodigal son meditates on and figures out the manner of his return. He proposes to present himself to his father with a sincere confession, without any excuses or justifications. ***I shall get up and go to my father and I shall say to him: 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and you.'*** [Lk 15:18]. The disgust that he feels toward himself brings him to humiliate himself. ***I no longer deserve to be called your son*** [ib, v. 19]. He proposes for himself from then on austerity of life and penance. ***Treat me as one of your servants.*** What a change in a young man who was formerly unruly, presumptuous and engulfed in pleasure. This is how sorrow works in a repentant soul, a sorrow that should also work in me.

I, too, shall rise and return, not to my master or judge, but to my Father. If I have lost the title of son, He has not lost that of Father. I will find Him full of goodness and tenderness for me. I am certain that He Himself will come to meet me and make my return to him more easy and that He will grant me the forgiveness of my sins, and will then constantly help me on the road to perfection. Many others after having lived like me in sin, or lukewarmness, became true models of perfection and saints.

⁴¹ o.c., March 27, 1809.

⁴² o.c. September 13, 1808.

⁴³ o.c., September 9, 1808.

⁴⁴ o.c., August 21, 1808.

⁴⁵ o.c., July 18, 1808.

I can firmly hope that He will bestow profusely on me His consolations, even without my asking for them. He will know how to compensate me well and reward the victory that with His grace I will have acquired⁴⁶.

74: The resurrection of the soul

If sin is the death of the soul, repentance is its resurrection. In fact, it reconciles us with God Who is our life, and thus life is given back to us. What then is more precious and more esteemed than this life that is given back by penance, that is a participation in the very life of God?

The sentence of eternal death already thundered against the sinner is transformed into a right to eternal life. Yes, indeed, eternal life is the sweetest fruit of conversion. God Himself assures us of this: ***I do not wish the death of the sinner, but that he be converted and live*** [Ezk 33:11]. Certainly penance makes the man: ***An heir in hope of eternal life*** [Tt 3:7] because from being a slave to sin, it makes him the adopted son of God. It makes him son because it makes him just, and from being an enemy of God, it places him again in His friendship, and forms him in His grace. This is well represented to us in the parable of the Prodigal Son. When the sinner, after much going astray, returns penitent to God's feet and says: ***Father, I have sinned against heaven and You*** [Lk 15:21] that good and loving Father receives him, and gives him the kiss of peace and immediately orders that the best robe be put on him, which is the nuptial garment of charity and grace. He puts on his finger a ring that is the pledge of faith and the seal of the Holy Spirit, a heavenly supernatural banquet is prepared: the Body and Blood of Christ His Son and our savior, with which He nourishes, reinforces and recreates him.

Not only this. Often repentance brings it about that man, rising from sin, receives a grace greater than that he had before, through which it often happens that ***Where sin increased. Grace overflowed all the more*** [Rm 5:20]. In fact we can say with certainty that by penance the sinner very often receives from God a greater supply of grace than the innocent according to the word of the Gospel: ***The last shall be first*** [Mt 20:16].⁴⁷

75: Repentance and trust

I read in the Gospel about the leper who prayed: ***Lord, if You wish, You can make me clean!*** [Mt 8:2], and touched by Christ, he was immediately cured. I also read about the centurion who met Him, and said: ***Lord, my servant lies home paralyzed, say only the word and my servant will be healed*** [Mt 8:6-8], and in conformity with his faith, at that very instant the servant was cured. These two miracles have made me reflect that there isn't any ailment of our spirit, no matter how serious and apparently incurable, that by means of recourse to the grace of the Lord, cannot be promptly and even prodigiously healed.

If we don't succeed in taking away the leprosy of sin, and if our heart does not rise from the bed of worldly pleasures in which it has lain perhaps for many years, the

⁴⁶ Retreat Meditations. **MssB 2434-2446.**

⁴⁷ Early Sermons, n. 38. 'The most sweet fruit of penance'. **MssB 1200-1203.**

cause is solely within us, in our weakness, in our sloth, in our lack of trust. How deplorable it is to see that so many Christians, realizing their sad state, don't know how to decide to get themselves out of it effectively. I would like to try to bring into these despondent spirits, difficult though it may be, trust and confidence.

How is it possible to despair rising from one's special sins, even to arrive higher than the point from which one has fallen, and to succeed in being perfect Christians and even saints? To God, nothing is impossible, nothing difficult. If the devil could make someone fall into the misery of sin, will not God cause him to rise and repair the damage? Let us pay attention to what happens when we lack trust in God. We do more harm to Him by mistrusting Him that we did by sinning against Him.

Whoever has fallen into serious sins and has even multiplied them as much as he wants, but has not arrived at the point of denying God and His attributes of mercy and omnipotence, he has no reason to despair, in fact, know how he can keep his eyes lifted to His merciful Lord until he is moved to mercy⁴⁸.

76: Believe in the pardon of God

This is what all the tricks of the devil aim at: to take trust away from our spirit because this can save us: ***In hope we are saved*** [Rm 8:24]. But someone will think that it is true that God can pardon us, however, the point is something else. Will God, the Supreme Justice, always be disposed to turn toward us a serene and kindly countenance after so many faults by which we have provoked His wrath?

I understand the point. There are people who tend to measure the indignation of God with the measure of man. Thus, mercy may fall into an error that results highly dangerous for us and insulting to God. If the indignation of God were similar to the passion that disturbs man, there would be no reason to fear that it is not impossible to put out a fire of such vast wrath as that stirred up by our sins. But because in God there is not even the shadow of passion, and wherever He punishes us, it is not through anger, because He always has a loving care for us, we can in every case take courage and trust in the value of penance. Let us persuade ourselves that God loves us even when he is most angry, and if He threatens us because we have distanced ourselves from Him, it is because He wishes greatly to draw us to Himself. Let us think better of God after we have seen how He, through love for us, did not spare His only-begotten Son, but has seen how He, through love for us, did not spare His only-begotten Son, but has given Him over to the most cruel torments and an ignominious death to redeem us from our sins. And if for thirty-three years the Word made man has run after sinners who were fleeing from Him. If He still continues to send His messengers calling them, exhorting them, offering His mercy, how will He be able to reject us? No, it is not possible.

God never rejects a sincere repentance, even if the man has fallen into the abyss of all evils – rather, He accepts him, embraces him, and helps him to get up and recover his former dignity⁴⁹.

⁴⁸ Early Sermons, n. 27. 'The desperation of the conversion of one's self.' **MssB 992-996; PVC pp. 37-39.**

⁴⁹ Early Sermons, n. 27. 'The desperation of one's own conversion'. **MssB 997-1000. PVC 39-41.**

77: Conversion and peace of heart.

Return to Me, with all your heart, says the Lord through the mouth of Joel, ***and I will repay you for the years when the locust, the grasshopper, the devourer, and cutter have eaten*** [Jl 2:12, 25], when your passions reigned over you.

What consolation for a penitent sinner to find himself so rich after so much misery! What joy to see oneself surrounded by such great glory after so much ignominy! How pleasing must good health be after having experienced sickness. How dear is life after the sorrows, the distresses, and the agony of death! No more recourse, no more sadness, no more fears. A most sweet peace in the heart, an undisturbed calm in the heart, and unspeakable tranquility in the spirit. This is the fruit of penance, so sweet to taste in thought, how much more to taste it by experience.

Let us therefore turn our hearts to God immediately and sincerely. Considering our mistakes and misguided ways, let us have for them a very lively displeasure, a very strong displeasure, and a very strong detestation, and the most definite aversion.

Let us decide with all resolution and constancy to correct our life seriously and to make our behavior better. With renewed hope, or rather, with sure trust to obtain pardon, let us confess to the priest all the faults committed, ready to give the satisfaction owed to God and men.

Thus, our stoles washed and re-whitened in the Blood of the Lamb that same immaculate Lamb, Jesus Christ, who came to take away the sins of the world [Jn 1:29], we shall make ourselves worthy to go to meet Him, and to be admitted by Him to share in all those gifts that He carries with Him, and of His very heredity. ***They will walk with me dressed in white, because they are worthy*** [Rv 3:4]⁵⁰.

78: Conversion is less difficult than it seems

If St. Paul considered every tribulation light which he suffered in contrast to that immense weight of glory to which he aspired [2 Co 4:17], why will not the calming of our passions be something lighter?

We are not urged to those dangers, to that daily death, to those beatings, to those prisons, or to those discomforts which the Apostle had to suffer, but only to free ourselves from slavery to sin and to return to the life of grace.

Why should we wish to lose heart and let ourselves be taken in by mistrust? Those merchants who seek their riches far off over the sea often experience shipwreck. And yet they begin again with courage right from the start and carry on in their uncertain and dangerous voyage. Why don't we, who are certain of a happy ending, begin the same voyage again? Will we remain with our hands in idleness to consider our losses uselessly, without repairing them with all solicitude? Many holy people also fell and they fell grievously. David fell, St. Peter fell, and also many others. But, because of this, did they remain beaten and prostrate? No. In fact, they rose again with greater vigor, and became even more holy than they were before.

In the ailments of the body, hope is never given up. Why therefore should we lose hope in those of the spirit that are never without a remedy as often as those of the

⁵⁰ Early Sermons, n. 33: 'The sweetest fruit of penance'. **MssB 1206-1210.**

body? If it were true that the person who sins grievously cannot recover anymore, I would say that no one, except for a very few, perhaps, would set his foot in paradise. In fact, however, we see that the most illustrious saints were those who first had fallen, for example, besides St. Peter, there was Mary Magdalene and St. Paul. Inasmuch as that ardor which they had first exerted in doing evil, afterwards they changed to do good. It is for this reason that the devil uses all his strength to block conversion. He knows well that if they begin the task and are converted, they cannot be stopped any more, and aware of their debt, they engage themselves with such fervor to follow Christ that they often surpass those who live in innocence. ***The last shall be first*** [Mt 19:30]⁵¹.

79: God also supports the first steps of conversion

God manifests His goodness in the highest degree as soon as man takes the first steps on the way to conversion, even though these are still uncertain and imperfect, since He does not reject them, but even rewards them with plentiful recompenses. This is how He Himself speaks of His people through the mouth of the prophet Isaiah: ***Because of his sins I had to strike him, hiding my face from him. Because of this he was sorrowful and he went away with sadness on the ways of his heart. But I suddenly healed him. I led him and I filled him with consolations*** [Is 57:17-18].

The King Ahab had reached the highest point of impiety, and the blood of the innocent Nabot, betrayed while he was going to take possession of his vineyard, was still steaming on the ground. God highly displeased, sent His Prophet to the treacherous king to say to him: ***After murdering, do you also take possession? For this the Lord says: 'In the place where the dogs licked up the blood of Nabot, the dogs will lick up your blood too. I am bringing disaster upon you. I will destroy you and will cut off every male in Ahab's line... because of how you provoked Me... [1 K 21:19, ff.].*** Scripture adds that there was no one who surpassed Ahab in evil to that point that ***He seemed to have sold himself to do what was evil in the sight of the Lord... he became completely abominable...*** [ibid. v. 25].

Yes, this impious man, having heard the threats of the prophets, filled with terror, gave some signs of sorrow and humiliation, ***He put on sackcloth and went about subdued*** [ibid. v. 27].

Well then, God could not withhold the impulses of his heart and he immediately sought His prophet, and said to him with feelings of compassion: ***Have you see how Ahab has humbled himself before me? Since he has humbled himself before Me, I will not bring the evil in his time.*** [ibid. v. 29]. O boundless heart of mercy⁵²!

80: Do not put off the resolution of conversion

To postpone continually the decision and to wait for the opportune time is always a dangerous matter in any circumstance whatsoever, but it is not dangerous when it concerns conversion from sin to Christ.

⁵¹ Early Sermons, n. 27. 'Despair in conversion of self'. MssB 1009-1012. PVC, pp. 44, f.

⁵² o.c., MssB 1000-1002. PVC, pp. 41-42.

Scripture warns us. ***Say not: I have sinned, yet what has befallen me? For the Lord bides His time. Of forgiveness be not over-confident, adding sin upon sin ... Delay not your conversion to the Lord, put it not off from day to day. For suddenly His wrath flames forth, at the time of vengeance, you will be destroyed.*** [Si 5:4, ff.]. This is how dangerous it is to postpone one's conversion. Therefore, we are all urged by Scripture to want to be converted swiftly. One truth alone well meditated on is enough to save a soul.

Again St. Paul urges us: ***Or do you hold His priceless kindness, forbearance, and patience in low esteem, unaware that the kindness of God would lead you to repentance. By your stubbornness and impenitent heart, you are storing up wrath for yourself for the day of wrath and revelation of the just judgment of God, who will repay everyone according to his works: eternal life to those who seek glory, honor and immortality through perseverance in good works, but wrath and fury to those who selfishly disobey the truth and obey wickedness. Yes, affliction and distress will come upon every human being who does evil, Jew first and then Greek. But there will be glory, honor and peace for everyone who does good, Jew first and then Greek. There is no partiality with God*** [Rm 2:4, ff.]⁵³.

SACRAMENTAL PENANCE

81: Confession: a divine gift

God, who is eager to pardon our sins and to re-establish us in His grace, calls us and invites us to the Sacrament of Reconciliation. But sometimes it happens that the thought of going to Confession stirs up in our hearts a certain feeling of fear and dismay. The devil himself enlarges and exaggerates these false apprehensions. He, who a little while before had taken away every shame so as to lead us more easily into sin, now doubles the sense of confusion and shame to keep us from confessing our faults.

Now God assures us – whenever we decide, with sincerity and true sorrow, to place all our faults at the feet of one of His ministers, to take away from us every confusion; in fact, to change it into authentic glory. Indeed it cannot be denied, unless we also deny our faith, that in the confessional God amply remits and totally cancels from our soul every stain of sin, however grave it might be, the real and only reason for shame, making the spiritual life flower in it again, which had been crushed by the harsh cold of sin.

In Confession, the soul is cleansed, purified, and once again adorned with a ray of that most pure light that the Word of God pours into it. God put on it the precious mantle of grace, puts on its head a crown interlaced with the jewels of all the virtues, and puts on its finger the golden ring of charity, so that it recovers noble gifts and rich treasures of merits that it had before sinning as a matter of fact, it can happen that, upon rising, it even acquires a degree of grace greater than it had before it had fallen through sin.

⁵³ Retreat to Acolytes. **MssB 4598-4605.**

Why, therefore, be afraid to suffer confusion and shame there instead where true honor and an inestimable glory waits for us?⁵⁴

82: Sorrow and resolution

We know that the devil and sin are pressing us with a thousand scares, they threaten us, they urge us from all sides. They want us to understand that it is impossible to escape them, that the chains of our bad habits grow heavier and heavier, that the difficulties of living in the grace of God are insurmountable.

We know, however, that in the Sacrament of Penance, the Lord Himself comes to rescue us from the hands of our enemies, against whom He fights for us, and He gives us a guarantee of recouping our glory and our freedom.

What is requested of us is to say 'I will', with all the strength of our heart and then we become free, because the very omnipotence of God comes to our aid. Let us, therefore, resolve. Let us be determined and make a decision. Jesus Christ, the glorious Victor, is already risen after having conquered sin and the devil by His own death. Let us increase the glory of His triumph by seeing to it that He conquers sin and the devil in each one of us. Let us say in our hearts: Accursed sin, I detest you! Accursed Devil, I renounce you! Accursed chains, detestable fetters, I want to shatter you forever. And you, my dear Jesus, my God, I surrender, I offer myself, I abandon myself to you⁵⁵.

83: The sweet fruit of penance

Reconciliation with God is a combination of all that greatest and most desirable good things.

It brings, first of all, the remission of sin, indeed of all sins. There is no crime, however enormous in evil and multiplied in number, that penance cannot cancel, and not just once, but always, and an infinite number of times. God Himself guarantees this: ***But if the wicked man turns away from all the sins he committed, if he keeps My statutes and does what is right and just, he shall surely live, he shall not die. None of the crimes he committed shall be remembered against him; he shall live because of the virtue he practiced*** [Ezk 18:21-22].

These are the infallible promises of the Lord, through the mouth of the Prophet Ezekiel. Later on, through the mouth of Micah, God assures us also that He is pleased at the sight of our penance, so much so that He promises to cast away all our iniquities and to hurl our sins to the bottom of the sea, in order that they be buried in eternal oblivion [Mi 7:18-19].

Shall we continue to doubt the divine promises? Truth cannot betray itself. St. John says: ***If we acknowledge our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from every wrong-doing*** [1 Jn 1:19].

To remit all our faults in an instance, even as many as have been committed during many years of a sinful life; to obtain a complete and sure pardon, even if we have abused the Divine Mercy many, many times; to cleanse so perfectly our soul that

⁵⁴ Early Sermons, n. 10. 'The sinner invited to Confession'. **MssB 616-618. PVC pp. 57, f.**

⁵⁵ Early Sermons. N. 23. 'Freedom from sin and the Devil.' **MssB 913-918. PVC, pp. 35-37.**

there doesn't appear the shadow of any stain anymore, not even the most personal and hidden. This is the fruit of penance. Is this not only precious? Shouldn't it be exceedingly dear and desirable to all of us?⁵⁶

84: The Confessor and the penitent

The priest who sits in the Tribunal of Penance represents the Person of Christ Himself and takes His place. Now if Christ, far from rejecting any sinner who has recourse to Him, and who shows true signs of penance, always treats the publicans with great affection, and lovingly accepts the tears of the poor Magdalene, and absolves the adulteresses already condemned to death, and promises to bring with him into paradise a thief who turns to Him on the Cross, after previously having cursed Him, how will His minister not treat the penitents who come to him with the same spirit of kindness and meekness? Will he perhaps show repugnance for someone who presents himself, hurt by those wounds on which the Divine Physician prepares to pour His own precious Blood with kindness and effectiveness, like a heavenly balsam?

Further, the Confessor is also a man like all others, subject to the same dangers of falling, surrounded by infirmities, rendered compassionate by the experience of his own falls and those of others, he himself is bound to present himself for the purification of penance to be absolved of his own faults. He knows very well the frailty of human nature, in fact he knows that even the most holy and spiritual men are exposed to fall sometimes gravely. He is in a position, therefore, to appreciate fully that gesture of humility that transforms the sinner into a just man in the same act that he recognizes his sin in conformity with the golden saying of St. Ambrose: 'Granted, that we are all sinners, he is most worthy of praise who is the most humble; he is more just who recognizes himself as most unworthy.'⁵⁷

Therefore, the more serious the faults revealed, the greater the difficulties to overcome, the Confessor has that much more reason to console himself, seeing the efficacy of grace. He also has a good basis for believing that the penitent belongs to that band of the Elect whom St. John contemplates dressed in white before the Throne of God: ***Because they have washed their robes, and made them white in the Blood of the Lamb*** [Rv 7:14]⁵⁸.

85: There is no distress in confessing

After the Lord has freed a soul from sin, He wishes to take all defects away from it, likewise imperfections, and finally the disordered inclinations of nature.

But, because of this, we should not become worried about going to Confession. Also even when there are defects and acts of negligence, according to the teaching of the Council of Trent, it is not necessary to confess them, even though confessing them is always useful and devout.⁵⁹ In fact, Holy Communion remits them, as the Church teaches.

⁵⁶ Early Sermons, n. 33. 'The sweetest fruit of penance'. **MssB 1189-194; PVC, pp. 95-97.**

⁵⁷ St. Ambrose, *On Penance*, Book 2, c.10. PL 16,540.

⁵⁸ Early Sermons, 'The sinner invited to Confession'. **MssB 62-623. PVC, pp. 59, ff.**

⁵⁹ Council of Trent, Session 14, c. 5. *On Confession*. Denz. 1680.

Again, any fervent act of charity is sufficient to wash them away. Since these are only the effect of a diminishing of charity, any fervent act of charity cancels them completely.⁶⁰ Let us therefore love the Lord with all our mind, with all our soul, with all our heart and all our strength, according to the great commandment of the Gospel, and the Lord will have nothing against us, just as we will have nothing against Him.⁶¹ The shoot is not apart from the vine, but remaining in the vine, and indeed bearing fruit, the farmer prunes it so it will produce more fruit [cf. Jn 15:2]. When St. Peter heard that reproach: ***O man of little faith, why have you doubted?*** [Mt 14:13], he was not far off, nor on the way of becoming far off, but he was close to Christ and on the way of becoming even closer to Him, being lifted up by His right hand. He was at the point so coveted by the Spouse of the Canticles, ***Draw me after You*** [Sgs 1:4]⁶².

86: Saint Gaspar, Confessor

The good that St. Gaspar accomplished through the ministry of Confession, was exceptionally great. In guiding souls he had an exceptional skill and a very special spirit of the Lord joined to the greatest prudence.⁶³ There wasn't a soul that, no matter how much it was ensnared in passions and vices, by having recourse to the charity of St. Gaspar, did not find in him the compassionate Samaritan, who with the oil and wine of his goodness did not succeed in healing every deep wound. Various pastors and priests did not find a better solution for certain difficult and intricate cases than to send their penitents to St. Gaspar.⁶⁴

In hearing Confessions, St. Gaspar had an exquisite gentleness, and a kind manner, and he knew how to adapt the reflection, the advice, and the remedy to the type of persons before him. Whether it was a question of priests, distinguished persons, or the humble people of ordinary background, he knew just what to say that was best suited for each person. The reverence and respect he had for priests was particularly remarkable.

Once when he was unable to go personally to hear a priest's confession, because he was confined to bed, he sent a young confrere, with this recommendation: 'Please go, but remember to treat him with all respect, humility and reverence.'

St. Bertoni had the consolation of seeing that many souls, through his ministry and that of his confreres, were won over to God, put back on the right road, and many even directed on the way to perfection⁶⁵.

⁶⁰ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II, q. 79, a. 4.

⁶¹ Correspondence, Letter to L. Naudet. December 1812.

⁶² O.c., Letter to L. Naudet. November 16, 1812.

⁶³ *Miscellanea Lenotti*, SA pp. 157, f.

⁶⁴ G. Giacobbe, *Life*, SA, pp. 487, f.

⁶⁵ *Miscellanea Lenotti*, SA, pp. 158, f.

IN THE SCHOOL OF CHRIST CRUCIFIED

87: Being disposed to suffer with Christ so as to reign with Him

Many times Christ wishes to reveal to His apostles, and on different occasions, the sufferings of His Passion and Death. The first occasion was when St. Peter made his splendid profession of faith by confessing that He was **Christ, the Son of the living God** [Mt 16:6]. The second, after He had cured the epileptic possessed by the devil, when **all were astonished by the majesty of God** [Lk 9:43]. The third occasion was when He had taken the Apostles aside as they walked along the way and said to them: **Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they who condemn Him to death ...but He will rise on the third day** [Mt 20:17-19].

With that the Lord wished to prepare His disciples to confront their sufferings courageously and constantly. It is significant that He revealed to them His coming passion at a time when He seemed to be most honored and exalted, either by the profession of St. Peter, or by the greatness of His miracles, thus preparing His Apostles in the days of glory and joy, for afterwards what would happen during the days of sorrow. He did this as though to say to them: *Since you want to follow Me, prepare also to suffer with Me, so that you will not fail in faith and love.*

Jesus, kind Teacher, where You go, I also wish to go, since to suffer with You is definitely to ascend and advance, not to descend. If I come to Your company, I have nothing to fear, for I will always have Your help close at hand. I wish to suffer with You in this Jerusalem on earth, so that I may reign with you in the Jerusalem of heaven⁶⁶.

88: The most treacherous of betrayals

It is nothing new to the world that an innocent person, or a virtuous, or beneficent one be betrayed by a friend and often by the one most benefited. Nonetheless, just as a person more innocent and more virtuous and close to Him that the traitor, Judas; thus it can be said that there was never before, and never will be after a betrayal so perfidious.

What a wound this must have been for the heart of Jesus. **My soul**, He said, **is sorrowful unto death** [Mt 26:38]. **If an enemy reviled Me, I could have borne it** [Ps 55:13]. But that a man so dear to Me, to whom I know that I have done so much good this pierces My heart.

This is Jesus, without doubt the most strong and invincible person, who by His free choice, subjects Himself as man to sustain the weight of those sufferings which we also experience, with the purpose of making satisfaction for our sins. In truth, His sufferings are all the more heavy as the knowledge of His mind is more acute and the

⁶⁶ On Patience, consideration 2. **MssB 4402-4407**. In the manuscripts three noteworthy texts 'On Patience' may be found: '1. On Patience - Consideration; '2. On Patience - Consideration'. More than likely Fr Gaspar made use of them for Domestic Exhortations, begun in September 1842. He referred to them when he wrote to Fr. Bragato: 'I bring to your attention that from Monday on, I preach every day in the house in the new Chapel, after morning prayer.' [Correspondence, p. 234. Letter of September 26, 1842. **BERTONI** 6, p. 69.

sensitivity of His heart more refined. The exceedingly strong resistance with which He opposes the attacks of the sorrow that afflicts Him does nothing more than to wring Blood from all his veins with such force as to make Him exude blood copiously, an unheard of sign of a completely new sorrow, that is, of a sorrow that reaches the peak.

Friend, what did you come to do? [Mt 26:50] Judas greets Him with a peaceful approach and places his hand on Jesus' neck to embrace Him. What will the heart of Jesus do now? How will He accept him willingly, how He will forgive and comfort him, granting him pardon! In effect, He does not reject him. He accepts him, He allows him to kiss Him. However, He adds: **Judas, are you betraying Me with a kiss?** [Lk 22:48]. Now we understand the extreme treachery of this betrayal. Judas had made this arrangement with the soldiers who had to arrest Jesus. In fact, at the signal agreed upon, they came to Him, bound Him and led Him away⁶⁷.

Betrayed treacherously, by a disciple who had received so many benefits, who was an intimate friend of Jesus, who was so privileged, betrayed into the hands of His most cruel enemies for the miserable sum of thirty pieces of silver. Jesus sees that He will be betrayed by so many Christians and even priests so greatly benefited by Him! What sorrows to that Heart! What distress!⁶⁸

89: The most unjust sentence

Without experiencing an intense emotion, one cannot look at Jesus, innocent and alone, even abandoned by His own disciples, before the judges who are His very enemies. These are searching for witnesses, and in fact, pay them, so that they will swear falsely. They question Jesus, and, at the same time, deny Him the right to speak. If he is silent, His silence is considered as a confession; if He speaks, His mouth is closed with a blow. This is a tribunal where justice is completely overturned, and where only anger, wrath and confusion prevail.

But let us follow Jesus to the tribunal of the governor, a Roman, who is presumably more impartial and reasonable. Pilate, after having examined Jesus on the accusations brought against Him, and having made His innocence clear, ascertains that the Jews want Him dead only out of envy. He goes outside and protests that he can find nothing blame-worthy in Him; and even more, Herod to whom in the meantime he had sent Him, had also declared Him innocent. Therefore, Pilate declares that after having scourged Him, he would set Him free.

But how? If Christ has been declared innocent, how does one wish first to beat Him and then free Him? And yet, Pilate knows His innocence, has Him scourged. Not only does he deny justice to the innocent Jesus by condemning Him, the worst thing is that justice is denied Him even as a guilty person in the manner of inflicting punishment on Him. To those condemned the judge first defines the particulars of the scourging; but, Jesus is left to the sad discretion of the executioners.

One is reluctant to describe the atrocious mockery to which the innocent Jesus was subjected when the soldiers put on His head a crown of thorns, and mocked Him with pretended acts of worship as paid to a king who is a joke. One cannot say which is greater, the pain or the ignominy.

⁶⁷ Early Sermons, n. 4. 'The Passion'. MssB 432-445. PVC pp. 272-276.

⁶⁸ Retreat Meditations. MssB 2604.

Many innocent people, we know, have been condemned to death. But has there even been a case where the judge first declares that there is no cause for death in the accused person, and then condemns Him to death?⁶⁹

While making the way of the Cross, at the First Station, I heard these words: 'If I, Who am innocent, allow myself to be condemned, why do you, who are guilty of a thousand faults, wish with such solicitude to be justified of everything in the sight of others?'⁷⁰

90: The most atrocious torment

The torture of Jesus exceeds and surpasses all tortures. Not in His hands and feet only, but in all parts of His Body, all wounded, He experiences the most acute pains at the same time. A flood of pain, that spurts and flows from every part of His Body and Soul, makes His Heart fail. Those pains so far surpass every human experience and estimation as the senses of Jesus are more perfect, and therefore more capable of suffering. His Body, formed by the Holy Spirit in the womb of the Virgin Mary, was most delicate and sensitive, while His soul, by the excellence of His mind, and the immense openness of His heart, was more than ever ready to perceive the reason for the suffering.

But, did not the question of love - the question comes spontaneously – diminish the pains of Jesus, or at least His interior sadness? That love which made Him say: *I thirst* [Jn 19:28], thirst for the salvation of souls, thirst to suffer ore precisely for their salvation?

No! In fact, His pains increased beyond measure. Because if He assured them voluntarily to free us from sin, He assumed them likewise in such a measure that was proportioned to the greatness of the satisfaction that He intended to offer for our sins. There, He poured out from His veins all his Blood squeezing it under the press of a torment that is the most atrocious of all. Oh, all you who pass today on the way marked by My pains – Jesus seems to invite us – fix the gaze of your contemplation on me, and see if there is any suffering like My suffering [cf. Lm 1:12].⁷¹

91: The moral sufferings of Christ

While Jesus was suffering so terribly, the executioners applied a special torment to Him, which I consider the torment of torments. Before His eyes they insult such tragedy, they mock His moans, and they laugh at His torments. And with this they go so far as to wound His spirit much more deeply.

What wound is more bitter for a loving Heart that sees death not only prepared for it, but feels itself insulted by the very people for whose salvation it is dying? What a deep wound in that Heart already wounded by the sins of all men! In a Heart that attributes to itself those sins as though they were Its own faults, with the most bitter contrition!

⁶⁹ Early Sermons, n. 4. 'The Passion'. **MssB 447-456. PVC, pp. 276-279.**

⁷⁰ Spiritual Journal. October 24, 1808.

⁷¹ Early Sermons. N. 4, 'The Passion'. **MssB 478-487.PVC pp. 284, f.**

Even the thieves who were crucified with Him insulted Him. And what about Jesus? Hardly had one of them repented and recognized his error, Jesus said to him: ***This day you will be with Me in paradise*** [Lk23:43]. But this increases His sorrow. The thief is saved, and My people, My chosen nation, My dear disciple, Judas, is damned! Where is the usefulness of so much Blood that I pour out? To many, this Blood will serve as judgment, and this cross a scandal! In speaking this way, He sighs to heaven, then in distress, He looks down, and woe, He sees His Mother. At that sight, the bitter waters of loving compassion which had inundated the heart of His Mother turn in all their fullness from that most bitter sea to the heart of her son, which in turn already full to the brim, gives it back again.

Mary is weeping and John weeps with her. ***Woman,*** Jesus says, ***here is the one who from now on will be for Me your Son.*** [Jn 19:26]. Then, turning to the disciple, He said: *This woman, whom I must leave, will be your Mother.*⁷²

92: Contemplation of the Passion

When we want to pray, we ought to begin with Christ and His passion. Then we need to let our spirit free to be attracted by God.⁷³

Among the other fruits, and there are many, which you must take from the Meditation on the Passion, one is this: that you not only have to repent of your past sins, but you must also afflict yourself because unruly passions live in you that have contributed to crucifying the Lord.

Another fruit is that you ask Him for pardon for your faults and the grace of a perfect dislike toward yourself, so as not to offend Him again. In fact, ask that in compensation for His many sufferings for you, He grant you to love Him and serve Him perfectly in the future.

A third fruit is that with great determination you harass to death every disorderly inclination no matter how small it is.

The fourth fruit is that you force yourself with all your strength to imitate the virtues of our Savior, Who has suffered not only to redeem us by making satisfaction for our iniquities, but also to give us an example, and to encourage us to follow in His footsteps. What must we do for Him who has suffered so much on our account: ***Who has loved me and given Himself up for me?*** [Ga 2:20]⁷⁴.

93: Always with Christ Crucified

What happened to Peter after the Lord had made the first announcement of His Passion merits the greatest attention. The generous Apostle had scarcely made his profession of faith in Christ, the Son of the Living God, following a special inspiration from heaven, than suddenly he had to show also the serious immaturity that had remained in him on the part of human nature. When Christ announced His

⁷² Early Sermons. N. 4. 'The Passion'. **MssB 479-483. PVC, pp. 282-284.**

⁷³ Spiritual Journal. August 17, 1808.

⁷⁴ Retreat Meditations. **MssB 2631.** This selection has been taken from the classic work of Lorenzo Scupoli, *Spiritual Combat*, c. 52 – which Fr. Bertoni puts at the end of his Meditation – cf. **CS I, pp. 228, ff.**

approaching Passion, in fact, Peter burst forth in lively protest: **God forbid, Lord, no such thing shall ever happen to You.** Jesus showing how little he had understood the mystery of the Passion [Mt 16:22].

We know the answer of Christ, terribly harsh: **Get behind Me, Satan! You are an obstacle to Me. You are thinking not as God, but as human beings** [ibid. V.23]. As if to say: you have understood Me by admitting that I am the Son of God - now you are My adversary and tempter, because you are speaking against My Passion, by seeking to dissuade Me from it, but it is the will of My Father that I suffer. You are still far from the heavenly wisdom which knows and enjoys the things ordained by God, and you find yourself ensnared by human and earthly wisdom that judges according to the criteria of men. Come after Me, and learn to judge things according to My criteria.

From this, one sees the great esteem and valuation Christ has for His Passion and Death insofar as they were ordained by the will of God for the salvation of the world. We also see how He wants to have a great understanding of His sufferings and humiliations which we too must meet to serve and obey God, in such ways that whoever wishes us to deviate from that, even a good friend, and even one highly illuminated by God in other matters, we hold him to be a tempter and a rock of scandal. It is necessary to esteem and love what God esteems and loves, and abhor and reject what God abhors and rejects⁷⁵.

94: Maintain within yourself the same sentiments of Jesus Christ

The evangelists, referring to the prophecies of the Passion made by Christ to His Apostles, observe that they **did not understand anything of this; the word remained hidden from them, and they failed to comprehend what He said** [Lk 18:34], In fact, **they were afraid to ask Him about the saying** [Lk 9:45]

Actually, not all those who read the Passion, or hear it spoken about succeed in understanding it, penetrating it, or forming a real feeling about it for themselves, just as in their time, the Apostles, who were still imperfect, did not understand or penetrate it. Having the right feeling of the Passion, penetrating its mysteries, collecting the fruit that it brings with it and the grandeur of the world. Thus when Christ announced His Passion to them, they were greatly saddened and lost heart, because they considered it unworthy that Christ would permit in Himself something of this matter.

From this comes the fact that I, too, when I meditate on the Passion, am dry and without feeling, because I prepare to meditate on this mystery with a disposition that is contrary to it. I shall ask the Lord that He grant me the gift of understanding His Passion, that He give me the right feeling for it, so that the desire of St. Paul: **Have among you the same attitude that is also yours in Christ Jesus** [Ph 2:5] may be realized in me.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ 'On Patience', Consideration 2. **MssB 4412-4414.**

⁷⁶ 'On Patience', Consideration 2. **Mss B 4409-4411**

95: The true meaning of compassion

O Jesus, our love, we wish to approach Your bleeding body to make reparation by the just offering of our tears for the most atrocious injury that has been inflicted upon You.

We see Your body, lacerated by so many wounds, that they have taken away from it not only any beauty, but even the shape of a man. We see your head pierced by so many thorns, Your hands and feet so wounded, and Your side open. We wish to fix our gaze here and with the sorrow conceived by such a sight, we shall fill our longing of our heart, aware that we shall never be able to weep as much as we should.

O Jesus, this is the compassion which we wish to show to You. Now, speak to us and show us what we must do to console Your Heart which is so afflicted. We know well that nothing can bring You as much comfort as seeing in us that fruit for which You suffered in Your passion, which is to destroy sin and to stir up within us love for You.

We want to offer You a heart free of all disordered affection, and we wish to cast sin away completely from ourselves, in fact, even those defects which displease You most, and to set out on a virtuous way of life in conformity with Your will. No, we do not want our compassion to end in tears, but we pledge ourselves to console You by our deeds.

Give us now, with Your blessing, a pledge, as it were, that our tears are pleasing to You. We wait for an abundance of particularly efficacious graces from You, to the end that by coming to kiss Your wounds, and by mixing our tears with Your blood, we may be able to understand and put into practice in our lives what You ask from us for Your comfort.⁷⁷

96: The Passion of Christ in the intimacy of the heart

Christ revealed to the Apostles the sufferings and death that awaited Him to make them see how He always kept His Passion alive in His Heart, by continually relishing interiorly His bitterness, by drinking this Chalice which was painful, in such a way, that whenever He ate and drank, He preached and performed miracles and marvelous works, He always kept present in His mind the thought of His Passion. Even in the Glorious Transfiguration, He spoke of it with Moses and Elijah, as of something concerning which He spoke with pleasure, although it was certainly most bitter [cf. Lk 9:30, ff.].

He did all this also in order to move me by His example, so that I would keep His Passion always present in my mind, and to enjoy thinking about it, and speaking about it willingly, so that it would become like bread which is eaten with all other food.

My good Jesus, how can I not find pleasure in that to which You continually gave thought, and to speak of what You so often spoke about? This is my desire, O my Loved One. Make your sorrow like a little bouquet to put before my eyes, and in my heart, reminding me always of it and giving me courage for compassion and love for You more than for myself. [cf. Sgs 1:13], and I shall not take all Your sufferings in a

⁷⁷ Early Sermons, n. 4. 'The Passion. **MssB 490; 464-466.**

bunch, but I shall consider them one by one, while I walk through this mortal life and I shall comfort myself with their perfume until I reach eternal life.⁷⁸

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⁷⁸ 'On Patience', n. 2. **Mss B 3404-4406.**