

# THE TEACHING CHURCH

## Penitence—A Fine Flower of The Spirit

*Ordering life to receive the Gift of God—Repentance.*

In this column last month it was suggested that the story we have in the third chapter of Genesis owes its origin to reflection upon the fact of repentance. We all know the emotions we experience when we reflect upon some of our deeds—weariness, shame, disgust. These moments of disgust are among the most hopeful of our lives provided that we have some real knowledge of the way to deal with them. There are people who allow such an emotion to pass away unheeded, others try to repress it with a view to forgetting the shame. They sometimes succeed in that effort and bring upon themselves worse evils as a result. Unhappily we meet with people who appear to enjoy making hasty, spiteful remarks about everyone they know. Quite apart from the fact that such remarks are in themselves sinful, it is not unusual to find that one of the factors in the sin we note now is unrepented former sin of quite another kind. Shame, weariness, disgust, we all know them; penitence is a fine flower of the spirit and it is worth while to enquire what it is and how it grows.

### The Gift Of God

Repentance is acknowledged to be the gift of God as is shown in 2 Timothy 2, 24, 25. "And the Servant of the Lord must not strive, but be gentle unto all men, apt to teach, patient, in meekness instructing those that oppose themselves; if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledgement of the truth." Repentance is the gift of God, but that must not be supposed to mean that it is a gift of the same nature as artistic gifts, of which some appear to be totally incapable, for we have 2 St. Peter 3 9. "The Lord is long suffering to us not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance." These two texts show that repentance is a gift which God wills to give to all men, and that there are people upon earth who, by their own knowledge, may be expected to be able to prepare the way for the reception of the gift. The "Servants of the Lord" are the members of the Church which in one of its aspects is,

or aspires to be, an army of penitents.

Improvement in any matter can only be expected to take place by taking thought about it, and so the person who impatiently departs from the Church on the ground that it "does him no good" just cuts himself off from the hope of having his mind jogged in the right direction. Who can suppose that a person whose life is filled with work, golf, bridge, the pictures, novels and newspapers, with attendance at Church at Easter and Christmas only is preparing himself for the gift of repentance? Is it too much to suggest the probability that even private prayer has been dropped out of a life which shows these outward signs? Repentance truly is the gift of God but a man must order his life in such a way that he may receive the gift.

### The "Healthy-Minded"

Repentance or penitence is sorrow for sin, and the intensity of that sorrow is conditioned partly by natural disposition and temperament, partly by the stage of spiritual life reached by the individual. There are, however, people who regard such sorrow as evidence of weakness and suppose that an escape should be made as quickly as possible. These are the people who are supposed to forsake their sins without repenting of them. They are said to review their conduct, decide that it is unsatisfactory, and thereupon make resolutions of amendment which are forthwith carried into effect to their own satisfaction. The name usually given to this type is "healthy-minded" in contradistinction to those known by the unpleasant term "sick souls."

Now a "sick soul" is one conscious of acute mental and spiritual conflict and also conscious that there is need of external assistance if victory is to be won. "Healthy-mindedness" is splendid so long as it works and we need not hesitate to suppose that there are souls of such integrity as to make it possible. The question which arises in the minds of those who lay no claim to such "healthy-mindedness" is whether this appar-

ently desirable quality be not evidence of an inadequate apprehension of the majesty and holiness of God? What is the standard of values here? Is it really the standard set by Our Lord, and if its attainment is found to be easy without the penitence shown by the great saints, why has the secret not been disclosed to a world so sadly in need of it? The probability is that 'healthy-mindedness' produces righteousness according to some comparatively easy humanist standard.

### Penitence Habitual

If penitence is sorrow for sin and sin is opposition to the will of God, then penitence must be habitual; we can never make an end. This does not mean that we desire to find churchmen a collection of moping, morbid people. It means a clear understanding of the claim of God to possess our hearts, and a definite admission that we know we constantly try to escape this claim and need power to direct our life aright. Penitence or contrition is a particular kind of sorrow for sin. A man may be sorry for sin because he does not like the result. Quite good, but it is merely the mood of the morning after. He may be sorry because he realises that he could have done better. Excellent, but still the standard is himself. He may be sorry because he has offended the love of God and knows that God loves him in spite of that.

This is penitence or contrition and anyone who knows anything about it is aware that this is the one effective means of conquering sin and also that there is nothing harder for our selfish little souls. Penitence then is plainly needed by us all and we must both pray for this gift and so order our lives that we place no obstacles in the way of receiving it. It is one of the richest gifts of God as we may understand if we ponder the following words of Dr. Otley:

"Penitence is often the unsuspected source of joyousness, simplicity, evenness of mind, a child-like spirit, and thoughtful tenderness for others."

—S.F.N.W.