

REPENTANCE: THE KEY

AN ESSAY BY

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Who is not troubled today by endless problems? There is no lack of grounds for worry, no lack of temptations. It is possible that a general decadence accounts for the phenomenon of perpetual retreat. It is most disturbing to hear of moral decay through drugs and laxity in discipline in the ranks of the fighting forces of many countries in the world. And you should see how the cynics and nihilists are delighted by that! It is possible that an objective inability to withstand and fight is skillfully converted into a virtue - the praise of peace and accommodation.

Who is not perturbed by the apparent unarrestable, not to say unreversible, creeping encirclement of the Middle East, that crucial region both strategically and in terms of its wealth and vital natural resources? Have people really grasped the certain consequences of the Iranian crisis? While United Nations debates and decisions were almost always front-page news in the first fifteen years of the life of that organization, one hardly hears today that the world body exists.

Technology has indeed in every field produced wonders, but is man more secure, less nervous, more relaxed, more whole, more poised, more graceful, more sure of himself, more at peace with himself as a result? Is it not true that one of the principal casualties of technology and progress is *community* - the fact that people do not live together, that they cannot afford the time to live together, that they have become perpetual strangers to one another?

It is obvious that the sway of Freudianism and psychologism is working havoc in the Western soul, and those who are hit by it have no idea what has befallen them. On the contrary, they view it as an ark of salvation. The dominance of sociology is relativizing everything. Who is not troubled by the moral havoc caused by the media, especially television and the cinema, except those who are already brain- and character-washed by them, or, to use a Biblical term, who are already "overcome?"

Material values everywhere today appear to overwhelm and subordinate all other values, so that the good, the beautiful, the true, the noble, the pure, the spirit itself are reduced to functions of body and economics. There is an appalling moral crash: no standards, no principles, no unchanging values, no sense of honor, no sense of shame, no fear of God. And there is no end to the ingenuity with which these things are ridiculed and made fun of - called by all sorts of names: old-fashioned, reactionary, bourgeois, anachronistic, repressive.

The dominant theme in modern thought is the absolute self-sufficiency of man – no sense of transcendence, no genuine openness to “the wholly other.” And think of the hypocrisy that obtains. Far from daring to call things by their real names, people do not tell you the truth about the high matters that affect your destiny and the destiny of the world, although you suspect it, and they know you do. The plighted word no longer binds. A man’s word used to engage his honor, but today he changes his mind as though nothing had happened.

While scientific research and discovery is progressing at an unprecedented rate, who is happy with the state of the liberal arts, the humanities, the character- and mind-forming disciplines in the universities? The greatest single crisis in the world today is not what you read about in the papers, but what is happening in the universities, in terms of the interpretation of man and society and history and spirit and destiny. And people either do not care or are doing nothing or very little about it. If there are a hundred million dollars somewhere to be thrown away – and millions of dollars are literally being thrown away every day – there is no more worthwhile project for them to go to than the most responsible study by a team of responsible thinkers of the actual state of mind and morals, of spirit and fundamental attitude, in the universities of Europe and America.

Who is not complaining of the dearth of great leadership, not only in public affairs but in the realms of art and mind and spirit - complaining, say, of the absence of a truly great soul whose greatness was forged through manifold intense suffering, whose presence inspires and grips and commands and saves? Who sums up in his life trials and ordeals today the sufferings of a great tradition, a great epoch, as did in their own day Plato and Augustine, and in recent times Goethe and Lincoln, and later Churchill and de Gaulle, so that his word faithful to his vision will resound in the corridors of history for hundreds and thousands of years?



I assure you, my dear friends, I know exactly the qualifications required by every one of my statements to make it “scientifically” impregnable. I know that, for every statement of mine, there is an “on-the-other-hand,” and I know exactly what these “On-the-other-hand’s” are. It is a waste of time to enter into these refinements. The urgency today is to make you face this side of the coin.

There is then, my dear friends, no paucity of problems – no dearth of grounds for real concern. I could augment my list threefold, but what I enumerated is enough. It is the

indetermination, the ineffectiveness, the indecisiveness that astounds. It is as though people were lulled and blinded by these “on-the-other-hand’s” to which I alluded, so that they settle comfortably into a state of nonchalance. letting things take their own course.

Neither should we conclude that we are cursed or privileged with a profusion or problems above those of our forebears or of ages remote. Everything changes but man. Man is essentially always the same, the cynics and the votaries of progress and change notwithstanding. Listen to one of the outbursts of David in the Psalms, 3000 years ago:

Help, Lord; for the godly man ceaseth; for the faithful fail from among the children of men. They speak vanity every one with his neighbour: with flattering lips and with a double heart do they speak. The Lord shall cut off all flattering lips, and the tongue that speaketh proud things: who have said, With our tongue will we prevail: our lips are our own: who is lord over us?

Psalm 12:1-4

Can you improve on that? Are our conditions much worse than what David here depicts? And yet David hoped not in himself, not in nature, not in science, not in reason, not in his powers, not even in his nation, but in the Lord. “O Lord my God, in thee do I put my trust.” (Psalm 7:1)

The whole philosophy of Plato, the father of all philosophy as Ralph Waldo Emerson said, is a flight from the awful conditions that prevailed in Greece in his days - - and what a noble and magnificent flight! - to the peaceful world of ideas - and what a perfect and rewarding world! Thus Plato too hoped in something beyond and other. And, as Augustine remarked eight centuries afterwards, Plato was really groping for Christ, exactly as David and the prophets were, with the difference – the decisive difference – that Plato did not belong to the authentic tradition of revelation which is the only real source of all hope. And that is why Plato landed only in ideas.

And listen to Paul’s account of the condition of those who worshipped the creature rather than the Creator in his own day, which meant practically the whole Roman world. They were, Paul affirms in the first chapter of Romans, “filled with all unrighteousness, fornication, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, debate, deceit, malignity; whisperers, backbiters, haters of God, despiteful, proud, boasters, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents, without understanding, covenant-breakers, without natural affection, implacable, unmerciful who knowing the judgement of God, that which they commit such things are worthy of death, not only do the same, but have pleasure in them that do them.” Namely, they are “pushers!” (Romans 1:29-32)

Can we improve on that? Can we boast of something worse? But you might say: If men were so bad in Paul's own day, surely he hoped for something better in the future. Progress! Listen, then, to what he says on this subject to his disciple Timothy:

This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come. For men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous. Boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, without natural affection, truce-breakers, false accusers, incontinent, fierce, despisers of those that are good, traitors, heady, highminded, lovers of pleasure more than lovers of God.

II Timothy 3:1-4

Can you beat that? This description applies not only to "the last days" but to every day. It is true today. Thus every day is the last day. Everything changes but man. The human condition is always essentially the same. And what about Christ? He has no illusions about man - then or now or at any time. We are told that He "did not commit Himself" even unto those who "believed in His name . . . and needed not that any should testify of man: for He knew what was in man. (John 2:23-25) "An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign." (Matthew 12:39) "Ye shall be hated of all men for my name's sake." (Matthew 10:22) "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! . . .Ye fools and blind . . . Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell?" (Matthew 23)

Who dares say these things today? He was nailed on the cross because He was telling all men all the time: you are always essentially the same, even the best among you. Therefore, it is useless to think that you can save yourselves or that the Law or human wisdom can save you. There is only one way out - repent and believe in Me, and the Holy Ghost whom I shall send you from the Father will lead you into all wisdom and all certainty.

If there were one book I would recommend that you read other than the Bible to have your life and the events round about you wholly illuminated, it would be Augustine's *City of God*. Augustine depicts the total corruption of Rome in its last days which he himself experienced and saw - a corruption inherent in its very nature as a man-made fabric - and concludes that there is no hope of ever converting the city of man into the City of God, because the principle of the one is love of self, that of the other love of God, that the two cities must always coexist and commingle and that our hope in history can only be, not in the victories of the city or man, which are always ephemeral and vain, but in the news of the spread of the Gospel of Jesus Christ throughout the world, the news or whatever rejoicing and praise the City of God, which is the community Of those who believe in Jesus Christ, is granted in His name and for His sake and honor in its pilgrimage here below.

If Augustine is at the base of all Western spirituality, there lived a man in the East at about the same time who is equally at the base of all Eastern Christianity and who is also highly respected by the West. His name is John Chrysostom. His accounts of the social and moral conditions in Antioch and Constantinople would make you feel that he was preaching in any great city in the industrialized world today - in New York or London or Paris or Washington.

What is fascinating about great literature – Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, Goethe, Dostoyevsky – is not that ages and cultures differ, which of course they do, but how much behind its infinite variations the human condition is always essentially the same. Pride, passion, lust, vindictiveness, ambition, jealousy, intrigue, hypocrisy, sin, suffering, despair, resentment, stupidity, meanness, unworthiness, rebellion against his finitude, the sudden seizure of the devil, the “vagabond” in us, as Karl Barth calls it, fear of death: this is man. Of course there is “on the other hand” here in terms of greatness and nobility and overcoming and the achievements of genius all phases of civilization. But pray read the Book of Ecclesiastes to realize how much all this is, in the final analysis, vain. One of Nietzsche’s notable achievements in the nineteenth century was his merciless exposure of the mediocrity, hypocrisy and rottenness of European politics, thought, art and morals. And he did it from an outspokenly anti-Christian point of view. Although Nietzsche helped in many respects to compound the disease, much of his searing critique carries over to conditions in our own day.

My dear friends then, we are not better than past ages, but neither are we much worse. We are all human. This is our incurable state. The changes that enchant us are so many snares calculated to deflect our attention from the main thing – the unalterable sameness of our nature – the “vagabond” within us.

We cannot stand that sameness. But alas it is always there, even illusion which is our delight in the change. For soon we have to die, and we know it ahead of time. The unchanging finitude of man, the fact that he must die, guarantees his unchanging nature.

It follows that the only possible real change open to man in all history is the change from doubt to faith, from suffocating in his own pathetic self-sufficiency to opening up to the fresh air of something thrillingly other and different, from the torment of unbelief to belief in Jesus Christ – to listening to and obeying his invitation: “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” (Matthew 11:28)

The only new thing in history is the new creature, the born-again creature, in Jesus Christ. All else is stale and stuffy, all else is boringly repetitive. The only ground for real hope is the hope of the Gospel. For there is something here wholly different, wholly other, wholly unheard-of, full of wonder and hope. Jesus rose from the dead!



The alarmist and the apathetic are equally bad. But if I had to choose between the two, I would choose the alarmist. At least he is reacting, at least he cares. The apathetic does not care. The grounds I listed for worry and concern are all real. Each one of these 22 things I enumerated at the beginning would break the back of any thinker or statesman today if he really were to face it. They must all be honestly faced – each one of them. It is no use hiding behind your childish “on-the-other-hand’s.” There is a talking point between you and the alarmist; but between you and the apathetic there is no talking point at all. Callousness, complacency, indifferentism, escapism – these are the bitterest enemies of the truth today. In the face of the sad constancy of human nature, in the face of the ever-present “vagabond” in us all, what do we do? I certainly bestir myself. But equally certainly I do not explain it away, this “vagabond.” Equally certainly, I do not explain it away or merge myself comfortably into some naturalistic monism. Neither do I start moralizing about it or excogitating soothingly idealistic solutions to it, after the fashion of Hegel.

I listen attentively to what is given me from outside myself altogether. I open myself up to the total given evidence. I am given the Bible, I am given the living Church. I am given the great sacred literature which deals precisely with this problem: the problem of the “vagabond” in man, the problem of alienation and the devil. I am given the great sacred music. I am given my friends whose forbearance with me is simply incomprehensible. I am given the living Jesus Christ of Nazareth.

Neither the Bible, nor the Church, nor the literature of the saints, nor the wonderful heavenly music, nor my friends and acquaintances, nor Jesus Christ have I had anything to do with – nothing to do with them! They are given me from outside. They never depended on me or my feelings or my mind or my reason. I simply find them. They are all there, whether or not I ever existed. Thank God, they do not depend on my or my excogitations! It were terrible if they did. I hope here that Hegel and the idealists are listening!

And what is the unanimous message of this total given evidence? With one voice they all shout: Repent! Again and again, you find David in profound moods of repentance, and not only when Nathan confronted him with his enormous sin. Ezekiel shouts to his people: “Repent!” (Ezekiel 18:30) How many times the prophets perform individual and national acts of repentance – and the latter are the more impressive.

Nothing is stressed in the New Testament more than repentance and faith. The two go together. You cannot repent except if you have faith. And the least little faith will lead you automatically to repentance. John the Baptist, the forerunner, said one thing: "Repent!" The first public utterance of Jesus was: "The time is fulfilled" – namely, lo, I have come; "and the kingdom of God is at hand" – namely, I, *I* am the kingdom of God; "repent ye, and believe the Gospel" – namely, believe me. (Mark 1:15) When He first sent out His disciples and asked them to preach the Gospel, and to take nothing for their journey, and to be shod with sandals, and not to put on two coats, "and whoever shall not receive you, nor hear you, when ye depart thence, shake off the dust under your feet for a testimony against them" – when He sent them forth this way, of course they healed the sick and cast out devils. Who would not when he is empowered by Christ? But everywhere they went, they "preached that men should repent." (Mark 6:8-13)

In his first utterance to the people on Pentecost when they asked him in utter amazement, "What shall we do?" Peter answered, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." (Acts 2:38)

In his address to the wise men of Athens, the great philosophers, Paul authoritatively told them that God so far had been overlooking their state of ignorance and superstition, but now that Jesus Christ the Son of God, has come, "He commandeth all men everywhere (notice the authoritativeness with which he speaks – the fearlessness with which he faced these philosophers) to repent: because He hath appointed a day, in which He will judge the world in righteousness by that Man whom He hath ordained; whereof He hath given assurance unto all men, in that He hath raised Him from the dead." (Acts 17:30-31) Later, witnessing to King Agrippa, Paul affirmed that he "was not disobedient unto the heavenly vision (namely, on the road to Damascus) but showed first unto them of Damascus, and at Jerusalem, and throughout all the coasts of Judea, and then to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, and do works meet for repentance." (Acts 26:19-20)

In the book of Revelation, Jesus, "Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending," commanded His servant John to tell each one of "the seven churches which are in Asia to repent and hold to the faith because they were wavering and all sorts of heresies were beginning to contaminate them.

Pray forget for the time being about your latter-day theologians. I ask you, what is the teaching of the greatest American theologian, Jonathan Edwards? From the first page to the last of his writings, he is telling his countrymen and the world: "Repent!" This is then,

my dear friends, the witness of the Church all throughout history. This is the witness of all the saints. In its hidden meaning, this is the witness of all sacred music. That is why it often moves us to tears. In their patience with us, this is the silent witness of all our friends. And on how many times Jesus Christ Himself has shamed us and caused us to repent.

And all this, I did not invent, I did not deduce, I did not excogitate from some idea within me. All this I am lavishly given from outside, whether or not I existed, whether or not I took notice of what I am given. Repentance, my dear friends, is not regret. Regret is cold, subjective, mechanical, pagan, Greek. Neither is it when you say, "I am sorry," although sorrow is much closer to it than regret. Repentance is when man is totally dwarfed in the actual presence of the Son of Man who is also the Son of God – in the presence of Jesus Christ. Without the Son of Man, there is no man, no true man, and the door to that is repentance in the actual presence of the Son of Man. Repentance is exactly what Job shouted when God spoke to him face to face. "I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye I abhor myself, and repent in seeth thee. Wherefore dust and ashes." (Job 42:5-6)

This is what every honest man spontaneously says when he meets Jesus Christ. Not until we say this, in truth, do we know what repentance is and do we know Jesus Christ. It is correct to say both that repentance is the door to the knowledge of Jesus Christ, and the knowledge of Jesus Christ the door to repentance. When our eye falls on Jesus Christ, we cannot help but abhor ourselves. And abhorring ourselves, we cannot help but repent in dust and ashes.

I would not dream of repenting; it is He, He who makes me repent. I say, "He, He." I mean everything about Him. I mean His quiet, His word, His power, His acts, His miracles, His certainty, His assurance, His salvation, His grace, His spirit, His obedience, His Cross, His victory, His direct and indirect positive influence all over the world: I mean *Him* Himself. Who will not abhor himself then and repent in dust and ashes?

Repentance, my dear friends, is the key to everything. Without repentance, nothing is possible. We remain everlastingly in the hopeless rut of the old man, the "vagabond" in us remains lurking. With repentance and the flooding in of the Holy Spirit, who can say that anything is impossible? You can never conjure up repentance yourself. You can never "decide" "or make up your mind" or "resolve" to repent. Repentance is a free gift from Jesus Christ Himself, and you do not know when He bestows it on you. Nor can you, as it were, wait for it. His very presence, when He is present, calls it forth in you.

Just as the Bible and the Church and the tradition and our trends are not our own creation but are given us from outside, so is repentance. The tears of repentance are unmerited gifts from God. We do not know they know when they come, but when they do come, we state are pure gifts from God. Repentance is a state of being. When we are in the state of being of repentance, our creative powers are raised almost to infinity. It is not we who create then: it is the Holy Ghost in us.

Do not plan for repentance. It comes, When it comes, receive it without the slightest gloating, Repenting in dust and ashes is itself the Holy Spirit in us. "God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble." (James 4:6) Who humbles us but the presence of Jesus Christ? Who causes us to be puffed up but the "vagabond" within us? And who is behind this "vagabond?" The devil.

Does it follow that all that statesmen and leaders in all walks of life need to be able to solve the formidable problems facing them is to humble themselves and repent? It does not follow. Statecraft is a most hardheaded business founded on knowledge of objective conditions, of politics, economics, and the national and international forces at work, and of the "vagabond" in all men. Leadership, then, in the most exalted as well as the most humble walks of life, is grounded on the mastery of the objective facts and laws of that particular realm in which it operates. And this cannot just flow, as by magic, from humility and repentance. "Be wise as serpents, and harmless as doves." (Matthew 10:16) Serpentine wisdom appears to be necessary.

Technical competence requires years and years of the most serious study, years and years of costly experience, and personal affiliation with the given machinery that propels to responsibility and power. All this, humility and repentance, as such, cannot possibly provide. The critics of those in power are usually motivated personally and politically, but even assuming the total purity of their motives, they really do not know they will do better. How often we have seen them, when given the chance, do much worse?

Does it follow that, if competence and responsibility are assured, then, if the statesmen or leaders humble themselves and repent, they are likely to do a better job? It does. First, we cannot limit in advance God's ability to strengthen and guide the repentant heart. Secondly, at least the "vagabond" in that heart would be curbed. Thirdly, if it should be God's will that, repentance or no repentance, events move to a tragic issue as often happens, the repentant and unrebelling heart will take it without embitterment because he trusts in God. Fourthly, and perhaps most importantly, the mind of the humbled heart, washed by the tears of repentance, would be much more lucid and pure, so that his powers sharper and much less

analysis would be much darkened by bitterness. And he would be able, in total freedom, to put his fingers exactly on what went wrong in the developments that led to the disaster or to the impasse. And again in total freedom, he would reveal them unafraid to the whole world – and that is of the greatest benefit to posterity.

You should see – nay you should personally experience – the beauty and simplicity and creativity and peace and power and marvelous freedom which the Holy Spirit bestows upon the pertinent and forgiven heart as he analyzes the most complex and delicate situation! Therefore, my dear friends, in every sense repentance is a great gift; gift because it is free and unmerited; gift because God reconciles us to Himself through it; great because God may be pleased to inspire solutions through it; great because even if His wrath must reveal itself, repentance at least gives glory to God, at least justifies His purposes and actions “. . . that thou mightest be justified whenever thou speakest, and be clear when thou judgest.” (Psalm 51:4) And “yea, let God be true, but every man a liar.” (Romans 3:4)

IV

The real “on -the-other-hand” then is not the silly “on-the-other-hand’s” with which people deceptively console themselves. The real “on-the-other-hand” is Jesus Christ of Nazareth. He is the “on-the-other hand” – both of good and evil, both of what we worry about and what we glory in. “He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord.” (Jeremiah 9:23-24, I Corinthians 1:31, I Corinthians 10:17) In the manifold trials of our life Christ is testing not our sanctity. “For he knoweth our frame; he remembereth that we are dust.” (Psalm 103:14) He is testing our faith, namely, how much we continue trusting Him and His mercy despite the fact that we do not exactly drip with sanctity – how much we rightly understand Paul’s incredible statement in Romans: “But to him that worketh not but believeth on Him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness.” (Romans 4:5)

It is our faith, my dear friends, and nothing else that is always in the balance. The prayer of all prayers is: “O Jesus, increase my faith!” It is superfluous to say anything else. The greatest sin is not any other sin you may think of; the greatest sin is lack of faith. In fact, it is the only real sin. The miracle of Job was that, in the throes of the most awful afflictions visited upon him, he was still able to say: “For I know that my Redeemer liveth, and that He shall stand at the latter day upon the earth: and though after my skin worms destroy this body,

yet in my flesh shall I see God: whom shall I see for myself, and mine eyes shall behold, and not another; though my reins be consumed within me.” (Job 19:25-27) This is the faith of Abraham, this is the faith of David, this is the faith of Paul.

Would I rather not fall, and not have to leave Eden, and not have to repent, and not know Jesus Christ? No! I would rather fall and be expelled from Eden, if that should mean that God would send His only-begotten Son to save me, and I would know you the devil regrets Him, even if that should cause me to repent. I assure the conspiracy he arranged with Adam and Eve because the Word became flesh as a result, and dwelt amongst us. But the devil cannot help being stupid all the time.

You say, all this is heresy! I ask you: what is a better way of expressing your love for Jesus Christ? You do not rest in repentance. You forget it. Repentance has performed its function by putting you in the presence of Jesus Christ. It is the outward sign that you are there already. That is its end. Therefore, stay there where it has brought you. So, blessed sin, blessed repentance, and goodbye to both. It is not sin, it is not repentance that matters – it is Jesus Christ, the end of both. And if you sin seventy times seven times, and you repent, still it is neither sin nor repentance that matters, but only Jesus Christ. And who is routed 490 times? Not you, but the devil. And 490 times, peals of rejoicing ring all over heaven, and groaning and writhings all over hell.

V

Fellow vagabonds! Problems galore, grounds for worry galore! But who cares? God exists, Jesus lives! Man never changes, and therefore, the only new thing under the sun is the new creature in Jesus Christ. This is not our own doing – this is the doing of God. Man can never save himself, and part of the sad sameness of his nature is his perpetual illusion that he can. The moment Jesus comes our way, we realize who is our Saviour, and we repent. We repent not only for our sins but for our illusion, which is perhaps our greatest sin. We cease to trust ourselves, and that gives us the greatest release possible. We now just trust Jesus Christ, and Jesus never lets us down.

Repentance is the only key to the kingdom of God, which is nothing other than being as close as possible to Jesus Christ. Repentance is to be sorry for not having known Jesus Christ

and to be glad at last for coming to know Him. People in positions of great responsibility can only move in a vacuum if all they depend on is themselves. Since they are always the same, they will only succeed in leaving the human situation essentially the same, and that is not a great achievement. If God should be gracious enough to convict them and grant them the grace of repentance, for themselves and for their people and for their nation, they would then be open to His intimations, including the justification of His ways, not of theirs.

Without Jesus, no faith; without faith, no repentance; without repentance, no new creature. The holy tears and the dust and ashes of repentance are a sign that we have met Jesus, and that is enough!

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