# Treatise of exhortation to penance

Pacian of Barcelona (d. c. AD 391)

SermonIndex.net / Church Fathers

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THE PARAENESIS OR TREATISE OF EXHORTATION UNTO PENANCE. [Translated by the Rev. C. H. Collyns, M.A., Student of Christ Church.] 1. Although I have spoken several times, however hurriedly, of the cure of penitents, still, mindful of the Lord's solicitude, Who for the loss of one poor sheep spared not even His own neck and shoulders, carrying back the delicate sinner to the reintegrated flock, I shall endeavour (as I can) to build up even with my pen the example of so great excellence, and as a servant shall imitate, with the humility becoming me, the industry of the Lord's labour. 2. My only fear is, dearly beloved, lest by the unhappiness of wonted contrariety, by insisting on what is done, I should teach, rather than repress, sins; and that after the example of the Athenian Solon it would be better to be silent concerning great crimes, than to warn against them, the morals of our age having gone so far, that men deem themselves reminded, when they are forbidden. For this I suppose has very lately been the effect of my Cervulus , that the offence has been wrought the more diligently, the more earnestly it was branded. And all that censure of a disgrace visibly stamped and often repeated, seems not to have repressed, but to have taught wantonness. Wretched man that I am! Where has been my guilt? They had not known, I suppose, how to act the wanton, had not I by blaming taught them.

3. But let that pass. Rebels from God, and placed without the Church, are also exasperated by chastisement, as a wrong, indignant forsooth that their morals can be blamed by any. And as mud is wont then most to stink, when you stir it, and fire then to burn more if you turn it, and madness then to be more fierce if you provoke it: so they, by turning the heel, have broken the pricks of necessary blame, yet not without being hurt and wounded by their resistance. 4. Do ye however, most beloved, remember that it is said by The Lord, Reprove a fool, and he will hate thee: rebuke a wise man, and he will love thee; and again, Whom I love, I rebuke and chasten. Do ye then, following lovingly, not obstinately opposing, believe that the kindly and anxious diligence of this my work, undertaken according to the will of the Lord by me your brother and priest, is of love rather than of rigour.

5. Moreover let no man imagine that this very discourse on the institution of penance is framed for penitents only, lest for this reason whoever is placed without that rank, despise what shall be spoken as intended for others; whereas the discipline of the whole Church is tied as it were into this fastening, since Catechumens must be careful that they pass not into

this state, and the faithful that they return not to it; and penitents themselves must toil, to arrive speedily at the fruit of this their work. 6. But in my discourses the order preserved will be this. First, to speak of the degrees of sins, that no one think that the extremest peril is set upon all sins whatsoever. Then I shall speak of those faithful, who, ashamed of their remedy, use an ill-timed bashfulness, and communicate, with body defiled and mind polluted. In the sight of men most timid, before the Lord most shameless, they contaminate with profane hands and polluted mouth the Altar to be dreaded even by Saints and Angels. Thirdly, my discourse shall relate to those, who, having duly confessed and laid bare their crimes, either know not or refuse the remedies of penance, and the very acts belonging to the ministry of confession. Lastly, it shall be our endeavours to shew most clearly, what will be the punishment of those who either do no penance, or even neglect it, and who die therefore in their wound and imposthumes: and what again will be their crown, what their reward, who purge the stains of their conscience by right and regular Confession.

7. First, therefore, as we proposed, let us treat of the degrees of sinners, diligently searching out what are sins, what are crimes, that no one may think that, for the innumerable faults from the deceitfulness of which no man is free, I bind the whole human race under one undistinguishing law of penance. With Moses and the ancients, those guilty of even the least sin, and (so to speak) of one farthing were immersed in the same aestuary of misery; as well those who had broken the sabbath, as those who had touched what was unclean, who had taken forbidden food, or who murmured, or who had entered the temple of The Most High King when their wall was leprous or their garment defiled, or, when under this defilement, had touched the altar with their hand or with their garment come in contact with it, so that it were easier to ascend into heaven, or better to die, than to have to keep the whole of these commandments.

8. From all these therefore and many carnal offences besides, that each might more speedily attain his destined end, the Blood of The Lord hath delivered us, redeemed from the servitude of the Law, and set free in the liberty of the Faith. And therefore saith the Apostle Paul, For ye have been called unto liberty. This is that liberty, that we are not bound by all those things whereby they of old were held: but (if I may use the expression) the whole entangled mass of our faults being forgiven and the indulgence of remedies appointed, we are constrained to a few and necessary points, which, whether to keep or to avoid, were most easy for believers; so that he could not deny that he most truly deserved hell, who, ungrateful for so great forgiveness, kept not even these few. But what these are let us see.

9. After the Passion of the Lord, the Apostles having considered and treated of all things, delivered an Epistle to be sent to such of the Gentiles as had believed; of which letter the import was as follows: The Apostles and elders and brethren send greeting unto the brethren which are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia: Forasmuch as we have heard, that certain which went out from us have troubled you with words; so below, It seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things; that ye abstain from meats offered to idols, and from blood, and from fornication:

from which if ye keep yourselves, ye shall do well. Fare ye well. This is the whole conclusion of the New Testament. The Holy Spirit, despised in those many ordinances, hath left these injunctions to us on condition of hazard of our lives. Other sins are cured by the compensation of better works: but these three crimes we must dread, as the breath of some basilisk, as a cup of poison, as a deadly arrow: for they know how, not to corrupt only, but to cut off the soul. Wherefore niggardliness shall be redeemed by liberality, slander be compensated by satisfaction, moroseness by pleasantness, harshness by gentleness, levity by gravity, perverse ways by honesty; and so in all cases which are well amended by their contraries. But what shall the despiser of God do? What the blood-stained? What remedy shall there be for the fornicator? Shall either he be able to appease the Lord who hath abandoned Him? Or he to preserve his own blood, who hath shed another's? Or he to restore the temple of God, who hath violated it by fornication? These, my brethren, are capital, these are mortal, crimes.

10. Now hear John and be confident, if ye can. If any man see his brother sin a sin which is not unto death, let him ask, and the Lord shall give him life, if he have sinned a sin not unto death. There is a sin unto death: I do not say that he shall pray for it. But if you like, hear separately also of each. God thus addresses Moses when praying for the people who had blasphemed, Whosoever hath (He saith) sinned against Me, him will I blot out of My book. Concerning the murderer, the Lord thus judgeth, He that smiteth with the sword, (He saith,) shall die by the sword. And of the fornicator the Apostle says, Defile not the temple of God, which temple ye are; if any man defile the temple of God, him shall God destroy.

11. These things are written, most beloved brethren, and engraven on everlasting monuments; written and engraven, I say not on wax and paper and brass or with the pen, but in the book of The Living God. Heaven and earth shall pass, (He saith,) one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass away, till all be fulfilled. What then? Must we die? Many too have in mind fallen into these sins. Many are guilty of blood; many, sold unto idols; many, adulterers. I say moreover that not hands only are involved in murder, but every design also which hath driven the soul of another to death; and that not only those who have burnt incense on profane altars, but altogether every lust that wandereth beyond the marriage couch and the lawful embrace, is bound by the sentence of death. Whosoever shall have done these things after believing, shall not see the face of God. But those who are guilty of so great crimes are in despair. What have I done unto you? Was it not in your power that it should not be? Did no one warn you? No one foretell it? Was the Church silent? Said the Gospels nothing? Did the Apostles threaten nothing? Did the priest ask nothing? Why seek ye late consolations? Then ought ye when ye might. This is a hard saying. But they who call you happy lead you into error, and disturb the path of your feet.

He shews the way of wickedness to the innocent, who after their crimes flatters the guilty. "Are we then to perish? will some one say. "And where is the merciful God, Who devised not death, nor hath pleasure in the destruction of the living? Shall we die in our sins? And what wilt thou do, the priest? By what gains wilt thou repay so many losses to the Church?

Receive the remedy, if ye begin to despair, if ye acknowledge yourselves miserable, if ye fear. Whoso is too confident is unworthy. To this man (saith the Lord) will 1 look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at My word.

12. You then I first call on, brethren, who, having committed crimes, refuse penance: you, I say, timid after being shameless, modest after sinning; who blush not to sin, yet blush to confess; who with evil conscience touch the Holy Things of God, and fear not the Altar of The Lord; who come to the hands of the priest, who come in the sight of angels with the confidence of innocence; who insult the Divine patience; who bring to God, as if, because silent, He knew not, a polluted soul and a profane body. Hear first what the Lord hath clone, and then what He hath said. When the people of the Hebrews were bringing back the ark of the Lord to Jerusalem, Uzzah, from the house of Aminadab the Israelite, who had touched the side of the ark without having examined his conscience, was slain; and yet he had drawn near, not to take any thing from it, but to hold it when leaning through the stumbling of the kine. So great a care was there of reverence towards God, that He endured not bold hands even in help. The same also the Lord crieth, saying, And as for the flesh, all that be clean shall eat thereof. But the soul that eateth of the Jlesh of the sacrifice of peace offerings, having his uncleanness upon him, that soul shall be cut off from his people. Are these things old and happen they not now? What then? Hath God ceased to care for what concerns us?

Had He withdrawn out of view of the world, and doth He look down upon no one from heaven? Is His long-suffering ignorance? God forbid, thou wilt say. He seeth then what we do, but He waiteth indeed and endureth, and granteth a season for repentance, and alloweth His Christ to put off the end, lest they quickly perish whom He hath redeemed. Understand well, thou sinner. Thou art beheld by God. Thou canst appease Him if thou wilt. But grant that it is a thing of old that the unclean were not permitted to approach the table of God: open the writings of the Apostles, and learn what is of later date.

13. In the first Epistle to the Corinthians Paul hath inserted these words, Whosoever, he saith, shall eat this Bread, and drink this Cup of the Lord, unworthily, shall be guilty of the Body and Blood of the Lord. So likewise below: For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's Body. For this cause many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep. For if we would judge ourselves, we should not be judged. But when we are judged, we are chastened of the Lord, that we should not be condemned with the world. Do ye tremble or not? Shall be guilty, he saith, of the Body and Blood of the Lord. One guilty as to human life could not be absolved; doth he escape who violates the Body of The Lord? He that eateth and drinketh unworthily, he saith, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself. Awake, O sinner. Fear judgment present within thee if thou hast done any such thing. For this cause, he saith, many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep. If then any one fears not the future, let him now, at least, dread present sickness and present death. But when we are judged, he saith, we are chastened of the Lord, that we should not be condemned with the world. Rejoice, O sinner, if

in this life thou art either cut off by death, or wasted by sickness, that thou be not punished in the life to come. See how great wickedness he committeth, who cometh when unworthy to the Altar, to whom it is reckoned as a remedy, if he either labours under sickness, or is destroyed by death!

14. But if your own soul is of little value to you, spare the people, spare the priests. The Apostle saith, a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump. What will, thou do, by whose means the whole lump is corrupted; through whom the whole brotherhood shall suffer? Shalt thou live guilty of so many souls? Shalt thou be excused when the innocent shall have imputed to thee their communion, when the Church shall have named thee as the author of her desolation?

15. Behold again the Apostle saith to the Priest, Lay hands suddenly on no man, neither be partaker of other men's sins. What wilt thou do, who deceivest the Priest? Who either misleadest him if ignorant, or, not fully knowing, perplexest him with the difficulty of proof? I beseech you therefore, brethren, by that Lord from Whom no secrets are hid, even in consideration of my danger, cease ye from hiding the wounds of your consciences. The wise, when: sick, fear not the physician, not even when about to cut, not even when about to burn them in the secret parts of the body. We have heard of some who, not ashamed even as to parts of the body, withdrawn by modesty from sight, have endured the pains of the knife and of cautery, and even of the corrosive powder. And how great then is the endurance which men have shewn? Shall the sinner fear? Shall the sinner blush to purchase everlasting life by present shame? And withdraw his ill-concealed wounds from the Lord when He stretcheth forth His Hands? And hath he any thing whereat to blush before the priest, who hath injured the Lord? Or is it better that he should thus be lost, lest thou, shrinking through shame, shouldest without shame perish? By not giving way to shame, thou wouldest gain more through its loss, thou, for whom it were better to perish for thyself. But if ye are ashamed that the eyes of your brethren should see, fear not those who are partners in your misfortune. No body is glad at the suffering of its own members; it grieves with them, and labours with them for a remedy. In one and two is the Church, and in the Church is Christ. And he therefore, who hides not his sins from the brethren, assisted by the tears of the Church, is absolved by Christ.

16. And now I would address those who, well and wisely confessing their wounds under the name of penance, neither know what penance is, nor what the cure for their wounds, and are like those who lay bare indeed their wounds and swellings, and acknowledge them also to the physician who sitteth by; but when warned what is to be applied, neglect it, and refuse what they have to take. This is just as if one should say, "Lo! I am sick, Lo! I am wounded, but I wish not to be cured." Such is it, but see a thing still more foolish.

17. Another disease is added to the original cause, and a new wound inflicted, all that is just contrary is applied, all that is hurtful is drank. Under this evil especially doth our brotherhood labour, adding on to old faults new sins. Therefore hath it burst forth into vice more grievously still, is now racked by a most destructive consumption. What then shall I

the Priest now do who am compelled to cure? It is late in such cases. If however there is any one of you who can bear to be cut and cauterized, I still can do it. Behold the knife of the Prophet; Turn unto the Lord your God, (he saith,) with all your heart, and with fasting, and with weeping, and with mourning: and rend your heart. Fear not this cutting, most beloved. David bore it. He lay in filthy ashes, and was disfigured by a covering of rough sackcloths He who had once been accustomed to gems and to purple, hid his soul in fasting; he whom seas, whom woods, whom streams served and the land bringing forth the promised wealth, wasted in floods of tears those eyes with which he had beheld the glory of God; the ancestor of Mary, the ruler also of the Jewish kingdom, confessed himself unhappy and miserable. That king of Babylon performs penitence , forsaken of all, and is worn away by seven years of squalidness. His uncombed hair and wild roughness surpassed the shagginess of lion's mane, and his hands hooked with crooked talons take the semblance of eagles', while he eats grass as oxen, chewing the green herb. Yet this punishment commends him to God, and restores him to the kingdom, once his own. Whom men shuddered at, God received, blessed through this very calamity of a severer discipline. Behold the cutting which I promised! Whoso shall be able to endure it shall be healed.

18. I will yet apply fire from the cautery of the Apostle. Let us see whether ye can bear it. I have judged, he saith. when ye are gathered together, and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, to deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the Day of the Lord Jesus. What say ye, penitents? Where is the destruction of your flesh? Is it that in the very time of penance ye always walk abroad in greater pomp, full from the feast, sleek from the bath, with well-studied attire? Lo, here is one man once thrifty, once somewhat poor, once sordidly dressed in a coarse cloak. Now he is daintily bedecked and wealthy and a proper man, as though he would lay it to God's charge that he cannot serve Him, and would refresh his dying soul with the pleasure of his members. It is well that we are of moderate means, else should we be doing those same things too, whereof certain men and women of richer state are not ashamed, dwelling in marble, weighed down with gold, sweeping along in silk, glowing with scarlet. If the ferruginous powder glisteneth on their eye-brow, or the fictitious colour gloweth upon their cheeks, or the artificial ruddiness melt over their lips,----these things perhaps ye have not. But still ye have your pleasant retreats at your villas or the sea, and wines of more exquisite quality, and rich banquetings, yea old wines well-refined . So act, so believe, so ye but live.

19. I can bear it no longer, brethren. Daniel with his fellows, covered with sackcloth and ashes, bloodless through fasting, speaketh thus: We have sinned, we have committed iniquity, we have done wickedly, we have transgressed Thy precepts and Thy judgments. Of Azariah also the Divine Scripture saith, Azariah stood up, and prayed; and opening his mouth made confession to God with his fellows. David himself saith, Every night wash I my bed, and water my couch with my tears. But we----what of such sort do we? what like to this? I speak not of those things which we gather together in heaps, by trafficking, merchandizing, ravening; by hunting out gains abroad, and lusts at home; by doing nothing simply, giving nothing to the poor, forgiving nothing to brethren. Not even those things which can

be seen by the Priest, and praised by the Bishop when he witnesseth them; not even these daily duties do we observe: To weep , namely, in sight of the Church, to mourn our lost life in sordid garb, to fast, to pray, to fall prostrate; to refuse luxury, if one invite to the bath; to say, if one bid to a feast, "These things for the happy! I have sinned against the Lord, and am in danger of perishing eternally. What have I to do with feasting who have injured the Lord?" and besides this, to hold the poor man by the hand, to entreat the prayers of the widows, to fall down before the Priests, to ask the entreaties of the interceding Church, to essay all sooner than perish.

20. I know that some of your brethren and sisters wrap the breast in hair-cloth, lie in ashes, and study late fastings; nor yet perhaps have they so sinned. Why speak of brethren? The wild goats, we are told, know what will cure themselves. I have heard that when pierced with the poisoned arrow they traverse the Cretan forests, until, plucking the stalk of the dittany, they with the poisonous liquid of the healing juice expel from their bodies the ejected darts. We repel the fiery darts of the devil with no juice of penance, with no plant of confession. The swallow knoweth how by her own swallow-wort to give sight to her blinded young. We cure the lost light of the mind by no root of severe discipline. Lo! man like neither the goat, nor the swallow, is jealous of his own blindness and malady! 21. Now, brethren, consider what we promised at the close, what reward, or contrariwise what end will follow these works. The Spirit of the Lord threateneth delicate sinners who do not penance, saying, They received not the love of the truth, that they might be saved. And for this cause God shall send them the working of delusion, that they should believe a lie: that they all might be damned who believed not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness. Also the Apocalypse thus speaketh of the harlot, How much she hath glorified herself, and lived deliriously, so much torment and sorrow give her. And the Apostle Paul saith, Not knowing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance. But after thy hardness treasurest up unto thyself wrath against the Day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God.

22. Fear then, most dearly beloved, these righteous judgments. Leave off error. Condemn delicate living. The last time is now hastening on. Darkness and hell are opening their enlarged bosoms for the wicked. After the punishment of souls in time, everlasting punishment is reserved also for the revivified bodies. Let no one believe as to the heart of Tityus, or the vulture of the Poets! The eternal fire, itself for itself, renews the substance of the regenerated bodies . Listen, if ye believe not. The force of the waters raging in the fire shall be recruited by the punishment which feeds it. If ye draw back from the torture of confession, remember hell, which confession shall extinguish for you. Estimate its force even from things visible; for some few petty outlets of it do wear away the mightiest mountains with their subterranean fires. Thence do the Sicilian Aetna and the Campanian Vesuvius boil with unwearied volumes of flame; and to prove to us the eternity of judgment, they are cleft asunder, they are devoured, and yet do they never end.

23. Consider in the Gospel the rich man, as yet suffering under the tortures of the soul only. What then shall be those exceeding tortures of the restored bodies? What gnashing of teeth therein? What weeping? Remember, brethren, there is no confession in the grave; nor can penance then be assigned, when the season for penitence is exhausted. Hasten whilst ye are alive, whilst ye are on the way with your adversary. Lo! we fear the fires of this world, and we shrink back from the iron claws of tortures. Compare with them the hands of ever-during torturers, and the forked flames which never die!

24. By the faith of the Church, by mine own anxiety, by the souls of all in common, I adjure and intreat you, brethren, not to be ashamed in this work, not to be slack to seize, as soon as ye may, the proffered remedies of salvation; to bring your souls down by mourning, to clothe the body with sackcloth, to sprinkle it with ashes, to macerate yourselves by fasting, to wear yourselves with sorrow, to gain the aid of the prayers of many. In proportion as ye have not been sparing in your own chastisement, will God spare you. For He is merciful and long-suffering, of great pity, and repenteth Him against the evil He hath inflicted . Behold! I promise, I engage, if ye return to your Father with true satisfaction, erring no more, adding nothing to former sins, saying also some humble and mournful words, as, Father, we have sinned before Thee, and are no more worthy to be called Thy sons; straightway shall leave you both that filthy herd, and the unseemly food of husks. Straightway on your return shall the robe be put upon you, and the ring adorn you, and your Father's embrace again receive you. Lo! He saith Himself, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that he turn from his way and live. And again He saith, Shall they fall, and not arise? Shall he turn away, and not return? And the Apostle saith, God is able to make him stand.

25. The Apocalypse also threateneth the seven Churches unless they should repent. Nor would He indeed threaten the impenitent, unless He pardoned the penitent. God Himself also saith, Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent. And again, When thou shalt return and mourn, then shalt thou be saved, and know where thou hast been. And let no one so despair of the vileness of a sinful soul, as to believe that God hath no longer need of him. The Lord willeth not that one of us should perish. Even those of little worth, and the least are sought after. If ye believe not, see. Lo! in the Gospel the piece of silver is sought after, and when found is shewn unto the neighbours. The poor sheep, although to be carried back on His lowly-stooping shoulders, is not burdensome to the Shepherd. Over one sinner that repenteth the Angels in heaven rejoice, and the celestial choir is glad. Come, then, thou sinner; cease not to ask! Thou seest where there is joy over thy return!

Amen. [Selected footnotes only]

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**Source.** English translation: an older public-domain translation as collected in the Writings-Database (HistoricalChristianFaith), mostly from the Ante-Nicene, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers and similar nineteenth-century editions. SermonIndex has only divided it into chapters and short sections; the wording is the translator's own. Square

brackets, Greek or Latin words and footnote-free text are as the source file prints them, and a transcription error may remain. No Greek or Latin text is shown beside it yet, and no modern English version has been made.