

The Blood of His Cross

On Good Friday several parishes in my country hold processions to mark the passion and death of Christ. As part of this religious pageant, men carry heavy wooden crosses on their shoulders or drag heavy iron chains fastened to their ankles. They do so to fulfill a vow and as a form of penance, that is, to make satisfaction for their sins.

Their zeal and religious devotion is evident, and we should not doubt their seriousness and sincerity. Conscious of their failures, they are making a heroic effort to cleanse their souls and please God.

Sadly their zeal is not according to the knowledge of the gospel. The apostle Paul addresses a similar situation in his letter to the Colossians. Some Christians in that church had taken it upon themselves to follow certain ascetic practices which were not commanded by Christ or the apostles. But Paul denounced them as mere “commandments and doctrines of man”; he declares that, “these things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh.”

God is not impressed by our religious creativity nor is the harsh treatment of the body of any spiritual value. On the contrary human traditions distract our attention from the one and only remedy for sin. God has exhibited his Son, nailed on the cross, as the all-sufficient font where sinners can be thoroughly washed from their sins.

On the eve of his passion, the Lord Jesus declared that the new covenant is sealed with his blood “which is shed for many for the remission of sins” (Matthew 26:28). God set forth his Son “as a propitiation by His blood, through faith” (Romans 3:25); the faithful are assured that we are now “justified by His blood” (Romans 5:9); “we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace” (Ephesians 1:7); and that we are at peace with God “through the blood of His cross” (Colossians 1:20).

Furthermore the Bible teaches that the blood of Christ, who offered himself without spot to God, cleanses the conscience; and that his people have boldness to enter heaven by the blood of Jesus (Hebrews 9:14; 10:19). The apostle John puts it beautifully: “the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin” (1 John 1:7). It is no wonder that the saints in heaven will forever sing in praise of Christ’s sacrifice, saying, you “have redeemed us to God by Your blood out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation” (Revelation 5:9).

This then is our choice; we can either listen to the Word of God or approach him through our own religious inventions. We may have never carried a cross on our shoulder or dragged a chain for long, painful hours to make satisfaction for sins. But the concept of penance is an integral part of the Catholic religion; if you are a Catholic, your confessor must have told you, as he told me so many times, to say prayers, fast, or do some other religious act, as a form of penance.

But the Bible tells us to look away from ourselves and fix our gaze on the sinless Man that was nailed between heaven and earth. Let us cease from our puny efforts to justify ourselves; let us call on the name of Christ and trust in Him alone for salvation. Truly the blood of Jesus cleanses our soul from every trace of sin.