

The Aroma of Repentance

St. Ambrose of Milan

Let us, then, mourn for a time, that we may rejoice for eternity. Let us fear the Lord, let us anticipate Him with the confession of our sins, let us correct our backslidings and amend our faults, lest of us too it be said: “Woe is me, my soul, for the godly man is perished from the earth, and there is none among men to correct them.”

Why do you fear to confess your sins to our good Lord? “Set them forth,” He says, “that you may be justified. The rewards of justification are set before him who is still guilty of sin, for he is justified who voluntarily confesses his own sin; and lastly, “the just man is his own accuser in the beginning of his speaking” (Prov. 18:17) The Lord knows all things, but He waits for your words, not that He may punish, but that He may pardon. It is not His will that the devil should triumph over you and accuse you when you conceal your sins. Be beforehand with your accuser, if you accuse yourself, you will fear no accuser; if you report yourself, though you were dead you shall live.

Christ will come to your grave, and if He finds there weeping for you Martha the woman of good service, and Mary who carefully heard the Word of God, like holy Church which has chosen the best part, He will be moved with compassion, when at your death He shall see the tears of many and will say: “Where have you laid him?” (Jn. 11:34), that is to say, in what condition of guilt is he? In which rank of penitents? I would see him for whom you weep, that he himself may move Me with his tears. I will see if he is already dead to that sin for which forgiveness is entreated.

The people will say to Him, “Come and see” (Jn. 11:34). What is the meaning of “Come”? It means, Let forgiveness of sins come, let the life of the departed come, the resurrection of the dead, let Your Kingdom of Heaven come to this sinner also.

He will come and will command that the stone be taken away which his fall has laid on the shoulders of the sinner. He could have removed the stone by a word of command, for even inanimate nature is wont to obey the bidding of Christ. He could by the silent power of His working have removed the stone of the sepulcher, at whose Passion the stones being suddenly removed many sepulchers of the dead were opened, but He bade men remove the stone, in

very truth indeed, that the unbelieving might believe what they saw, and see the dead rising again, but in a type that He might give us the power of lightening the burden of sins, the heavy pressure as it were upon the guilty. Ours it is to remove the burdens, His to raise again, His to bring forth from the tombs those set free from their bands.

So the Lord Jesus, seeing the heavy burden of the sinner, weeps, for the Church alone He suffers not to weep. He has compassion on His beloved, and says to him that is dead, "Come forth," (Jn. 11:43) that is, You who lies in darkness of conscience, and in the squalor of your sins, as in the prison-house of the guilty, come forth, declare your sins that you may be justified. "For with the mouth confession is made unto salvation" (Rom. 10:10).

If you have confessed at the call of Christ the bars will be broken, and every chain loosed, even the stench of the bodily corruption be grievous. For he had been dead four days and his flesh stank in the tomb; but He Whose flesh saw no corruption was three days in the sepulcher, for He knew no evils of the flesh, which consists of the substances of the four elements. However great, then, the stench of the dead body may be, it is all done away so soon as the sacred ointment has shed its aroma; and the dead rises again, and the command is given to loose his hands who till now was in sin; the covering is taken from his face which veiled the truth of the grace which he had received. But since he has received forgiveness, the command is given to uncover his face, to lay bare his features. For he whose sin is forgiven has nothing whereof to be ashamed.

But in the presence of such grace given by the Lord, of such a miracle of divine bounty, when all ought to have rejoiced, the wicked were stirred up and gathered a council against Christ, (Jn. 11:47) and wished moreover to kill Lazarus also. O Do you not recognize that you are the successors of those whose hardness you inherit? For you too are angry and gather a council against the Church, because you see the dead come to life again in the Church, and to be raised again by receiving forgiveness of their sins. And thus, so far as in you, you desire to slay again through envy those who are raised to life.

But Jesus does not revoke His benefits, nay, rather He amplifies them by additions of His liberality, He anxiously revisits him who was raised again, and rejoicing in the gift of the restored life, He comes to the feast which His Church has prepared for Him, at which he who had been dead is found as one among those sitting down with Christ.

Then all wonder who look upon him with the pure gaze of the mind, who are free from envy, for such children the Church has. They wonder, as I said, how he who yesterday and the day before lay in the tomb is one of those sitting with the Lord Jesus.

Mary herself pours ointment on the feet of the Lord Jesus (Jn. 12:3). Perchance for this reason on His feet, because one of the lowliest has been snatched from death, for we are all the body of Christ, (1 Cor. 12:27) but others perchance are the more honorable members. The Apostle was the mouth of Christ, for he said, "You seek a proof of Christ speaking in me" (2 Cor. 13:3). The prophets through whom He spoke of things to come were His mouth, would that I might be found worthy to be His foot, and may Mary pour on me her precious ointment, and anoint me and wipe away my sin.

What, then, we read concerning Lazarus we should to believe of every sinner who is converted, who, though he may have been stinking, nevertheless is cleansed by the precious ointment of faith. For faith has such grace that there where the dead stank the day before, now the whole house is filled with good aroma.

The house of Corinth stank, when it was written concerning it: "It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and such sexual immorality as is not even named among the Gentiles" (1 Cor. 5:1). There was a stench, for a little leaven had corrupted the whole lump.

A good aroma began when it was said: "Now whom you forgive anything, I also forgive. For if indeed I have forgiven anything, I have forgiven that one for your sakes in the presence of Christ" (2 Cor. 2:10). And so, the sinner being set free, there was great joy in that place, and the whole house was filled with the aroma of the sweetness of grace. Wherefore the Apostle, knowing well that he had shed upon all the ointment of apostolic forgiveness, says: "We are to God the fragrance of Christ among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing" (2 Cor. 2:15).

At the pouring forth, then, of this ointment all rejoice; Judas alone speaks against it. So, too, now he who is a sinner speaks against it, he who is a traitor blames it, but he is himself blamed by Christ, as he knows not the remedy of the Lord's death, and understands not the mystery of that so great burial. For the Lord both suffered and died that He might redeem us from death. This is manifest from the most excellent value from His death, which is sufficient for

the absolution of the sinner, and his restoration to fresh grace; so that all may come and wonder at his sitting at the table with Christ, and may praise God, saying: Let us eat and feast, for he was dead and is alive again, had perished and is found.” But any one devoid of faith objects: Why does He eat with publicans and sinners? This is His answer: “They that are whole have no need of the physician, but they that are sick.”