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What was Jesus' attitude towards penance?

One of the 50 frequently asked questions about Jesus Christ and the Church, answered by a team of professors of History and Theology at the University of Navarre. Juan Chapa is a Doctor of Theology from the University of Navarre.

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As in other religions, penitential practices were deeply rooted in the

life of the people of Israel. Prayer, almsgiving, fasting, ashes on the head, the wearing of a coarse and rough cloth (called sackcloth) were some of the many ways in which the Israelites showed their desire to reorient life and convert to God (Cf. Tb 12:8; Is 58:5; Joel 2:12-13; Dn 9:3 etc.).

The Kingdom of God was central to Jesus' preaching, as historians and scholars of Scripture unanimously point out, and he always demanded conversion as an essential part of the proclamation of the Kingdom: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the Gospel" (Mk 1:15). The conversion and penance to which Jesus calls his listeners require a profound change of heart and a corresponding change of life. Conversion leads to penance and bears worthy fruit in action (Mt 3:8).

In other words, doing penance is something authentic and effective only when translated into acts and gestures. In fact, through his own penitent life, Jesus showed that the Kingdom of God and penance cannot be separated. He practiced fasting (Mt 4:2), renounced the comfort of a permanent place to rest (Mt 8:20), spent whole nights in prayer (Lk 6:12) and, above all, voluntarily gave his life on the Cross.

The first disciples of Jesus, following his teachings, understood that following Christ meant imitating his attitudes. Among the evangelists, St. Luke emphasizes most strongly the Christian's need to live as Christ lived and to take up one's cross every day, as Jesus had asked his disciples: "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" (Lk 9:23). The first Christians continued to go to the temple to pray (Acts 3:1) and to

practice works of penance, such as fasting (Acts 13:2-3). Moreover, they followed Jesus' explicit instructions regarding fasting: "When you fast, do not pretend to be sad like the hypocrites, who disfigure their faces so that men will notice that they fast. Truly I say to you, they have already received their reward. But you, when you fast, perfume your head and wash your face, so that men will not notice that you fast, but your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in the secret place will reward you" (Mt 6:16-18).

In the light of the immense redemptive value of Christ's Death on the Cross, from the beginning Christians understood that suffering and penitential practices—especially fasting, prayer, and almsgiving—were integral to true conversion. Even more, they could be associated with Jesus as a means of participating in Christ's sacrifice and

co-redeeming with him. Thus the Church continues to live what St. Paul wrote: "I complete in my flesh what is lacking in Christ's sufferings for the sake of his body, that is, the Church" (Col 1:24).

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