

Striking the Breast

When the priest begins Holy Mass, while he is standing at the foot of the altar, the faithful, or the servers in their stead, say "I confess to Almighty God...that I have sinned exceedingly in thought, word and deed, through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault," and each time they confess their guilt they strike their breasts. What is the significance of this striking the breast?

All its meaning lies in its being rightly done. To brush one's clothes with the tips of one's fingers is not to strike the breast. We should beat upon our breasts with our closed fists. In the old picture of Saint Jerome in the desert he is kneeling on the ground and striking his breast with a stone. It is an honest blow, not an elegant gesture. To strike the breast is to beat against the gates of our inner world in order to shatter them. This is its significance.

That world, that inner world, should be full of light, strength, and active energy. Is it? We should engage most earnestly in the search to find out how it really stands with us within. What has our response been to the grave demands made on us by duty? By our neighbors, needs? By the decisions we were called on to make? Scarcely anything stirs in answer. We have loaded ourselves with innumerable offences. Do they trouble us? "In the midst of life we are in death." We hardly give it a thought. "Awake, look into yourself, bethink yourself, reflect, repent, do penance." It is the voice of God. Striking the breast is the visible sign that we hear that summons. Let the blow penetrate. Let it rouse up that sleeping inner world. Let it wake us up, and make us see, and turn to God.

And when we do reflect, what do we see? We see our lives trifled away, God's commandments transgressed, duties neglected, "through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault." A world of guilt lies imprisoned within our breasts. There is but one way to get rid of it, by the whole-hearted confession that "I have sinned in thought, word and deed against God most holy, against the communion of saints." The soul moves over to the side of God and takes his part against herself. We think of ourselves as God thinks of us. We are stirred to anger against ourselves on account of our sins, and we punish ourselves with a blow.

The blow also is to wake us up. It is to shake the soul awake into the consciousness that God is calling, so that she may hear, and take his part and punish herself. She reflects, repents and is contrite. It is for this reason that priest and people strike their breasts when they confess their sins at the foot of the altar.

Before Communion also we strike our breasts when the priest holds up for us to see the Body of the Lord, and we say, "Lord, I am not worthy that thou shouldst enter under my roof, and again, in the litany when we confess our guilt and say, "We sinners beseech thee to hear us." But in these customs the force of the meaning of the rite has been weakened, as it has been also when the Host or Chalice is lifted up, or in the Angelus at the words, "The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us." The gesture in these instances has come to mean no more than reverence or humility. Its astringency should be restored. It is a summons to repentance and to the self-inflicted punishment of a contrite heart.