



Cleanse me with hyssop, that I may be pure; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow. (Psalm 51:9)

March 10, 2026

Hello Everyone —

What is the purpose of penance?

Once upon a time, a very earnest young man visited a famous rabbi. He told the rabbi that he, too, wanted to become a rabbi and asked for his advice. It was wintertime. The rabbi stood at the window looking out into the yard while the rabbinical candidate gave him a glowing account of his piety and learning.

The young man said, “You see, Rabbi, I always dress in spotless white like the sages of old. I never drink any alcoholic beverages; only water ever passes my lips. I perform numerous penances. For instance, I always carry sharp-edged nails inside my shoes to mortify myself. Even in the coldest winter, I lie naked in the snow to punish my flesh. And to complete my penance, I take a dozen lashes every day on my bare back.”

As the young man spoke, a stable boy brought a white horse into the yard and led him to the water trough. The horse drank his fill of water, and having done so, rolled in the snow, as horses sometimes do.

“Just look!” cried the rabbi. “That animal, too, is dressed in white. It also drinks nothing but water, has nails in its shoes, and rolls naked in the snow. Also, rest assured, it gets its daily ration of lashes on the rump from its master.”

“Now, I ask you, is it a saint, or is it a horse?”

Penance is not intended to be an end in itself, is it? It is not meant to undo the past. The past is done. Nor is it meant to persuade God to erase our sins and forgo the punishment we deserve for them.

Rather, is not the purpose of undertaking penance a means of acknowledging that we are sinners? Through works of penance, are we not expressing the desire to change our lives? It is exactly through the pruning of penance that we turn our back on our old self and sincerely resolve to start again with the help of God's grace.

What is your purpose in performing the acts of penance you do?

I recently ran across the following reflection from Fr. Flor McCarthy, S.D.B. Apropos for a season desirous of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving, don't you think?

Pruning time is a painful time for the fruit tree.

The pruner rids it of all those suckers

which use up a lot of energy but produce no fruit.

However, the aim of this surgery is not to inflict pain,

but to help the tree produce more and better fruit.

Lent is a kind of spiritual pruning time.

There is much that is useless

and perhaps harmful in our lives,

which saps our energy,

and diminishes our spiritual fruitfulness.

Of what shall we prune ourselves this Lent

so that we may become more fruitful branches

of Christ, the true Vine?

As I do for you, please pray for me,

Most Reverend Jeffrey S. Grob
Archbishop of Milwaukee

