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“Lenten Penance”

Okay Brothers, can you believe that Ash Wednesday is next week already! It seems like yesterday we were laying the Christ Child in the wooden manger and now we are preparing to move to the wood of the Cross. The season of Lent is one of prayer and penance as we will hear in the readings on the first day of Lent: “Even now, says the LORD, return to me with your whole heart, with fasting, and weeping, and mourning; Rend your hearts, not your garments, and return to the LORD, your God” (Joel 2:12 ff). Lent is about the body and the soul.

We live in a society which does not understand the Christian tradition of self-denial (i.e. penance and fasting). Rather we are to reward ourselves at all times! “Deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me” (Mt. 16:24) is antithetical to “if it feels good, go for it!” The closest we get to the concept of penance and fasting is trying to lose weight - the VIP Medical Weight Loss program has forced a lot of “fasting.” However, are we doing it with a desire to grow in relationship with Christ and identify with the poor, or is it just about losing weight and taking up another hole in the belt buckle? As good as this program is and as good as it feels when we get results, if the spiritual component is not engaged, it is not penance! Guilty as charged - we all are!

One of my favorite readings from the Office appears the day after Ash Wednesday from Pope St. Leo the Great. He reminds us of the following: “That which the Christian should be doing at all times should be done now with greater care and devotion.” So I want to invite us into a reflection on the virtue and need for penance in our lives. Lent is not about necessarily doing more, but going deeper and doing it better! “That which the Christian should be doing at all times should be done now with greater care and devotion.”

So let's be honest and admit that many of us are not living penitential lives throughout the year, but every Lent is meant to help us reconnect with this great ascetical practice that has been a part of our Judeo-Christian tradition from the beginning. Much could be said about the Old Testament references: from abstaining from the “fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil”, to ritual fasting before particular feasts, to an expression of contrition and humbling oneself in the sight of God. Suffice it to say, it is clearly part of our common heritage. Not to mention the heritage of most world religions - fasting plays a role in the spiritual life. In fact, I am embarrassed at how casually we embark on Lenten fasting and how seriously our Muslim brothers and sisters embrace the fasting of Ramadan! We certainly can do better, and must, if we are to encourage the faithful to do the same. As the *Code of Canon Law* reminds us:

The divine law binds all the Christian faithful to do penance each in his or her own way. In order for all to be united among themselves by some common observance of penance, however, penitential days are prescribed on which the Christian faithful devote themselves in a special way to prayer, perform works of piety and charity, and deny themselves by fulfilling their own obligations more faithfully and especially by observing fast and abstinence, according to the norm of the following canons (*CIC* 1249).

Really the bottom line for us is that Christ fasted and encouraged his disciples to do the same. During his 40 days in the desert he was “strengthened by fasting and armed with the Word of God” thus resisting the evil one. As the Preface of the First Sunday of Lent states: “By abstaining forty days from earthly food, he consecrated through his fast the pattern of our Lenten observance...” He is our exemplar *par excellence*. If He chose fasting as a way of growing in relationship with the Father, shouldn’t we do the same? Fasting is a deep part of the Church’s tradition as the *Catechism* states: “The interior penance of the Christian can be expressed in many and various ways. Scripture and the Fathers insist above all on three forms, *fasting, prayer, and almsgiving*, which express conversion in relation to oneself, to God, and to others” (*CCC* 1434). And we are reminded that it is not just for Lent: “*The seasons and days of penance* in the course of the liturgical year (Lent, and *each* Friday in memory of the death of the Lord) are intense moments of the Church’s penitential practice. These times are particularly appropriate for spiritual exercises, penitential liturgies, pilgrimages as signs of penance, voluntary self-denial such as fasting and almsgiving, and fraternal sharing (charitable and missionary works)” (*CCC* 1438). I want to be clear that we practice penance, mortification, and abstinence not because we are some masochistic sect, but in view of our new life in Christ, in view of being free from even our own disordered inclinations, desires, and attractions. All of our ascetical exercises need to be seen in the light of our truest desire to grow in relationship with Christ - He is our end and penance is just a means and not an end in itself.

It may be helpful to be reminded about the deeper “why” of fasting. The four prefaces of Lent will serve as our guides:

1) “For by your gracious gift each year your faithful await the sacred paschal feasts with the joy of minds made pure, so that, more eagerly intent on prayer and on the works of charity, and participating in the mysteries by which they have been reborn, they may be led to the fullness of grace that you bestow on your sons and daughters” (Lent I).

Fasting or any penitential act reminds us to invite God into our emptiness – It is He alone who can fill our hearts. If you are saying “no” to an extra helping, or skipping a meal or dessert, or purposefully sitting next to someone you don’t like, it is an immediate reminder to make an interior “yes” to God. The spiritual life is always about a deeper relationship with God - so fasting must be about the same (as are all of the works of mercy of which we have previously spoken).

2) “For you have given your children a sacred time for the renewing and purifying of their hearts, that, freed from disordered affections, they may so deal with the things of this passing world as to hold rather to the things that eternally endure” (Lent II).

We grow in charity and virtue by penance and fasting and “acquire mastery over our instincts and freedom of heart” (*CCC* 2043). While the first reason was about self denial, the second is about saying no to sin. Our will is strengthened and we are more easily able to say “no” to evil, and “yes” to good. Lent is a journey which invites us to have a deeper look at our lives in light of

the Word of God so as to be able to re-commit ourselves more fully to the Lord at the Easter Vigil. The renewal of our Baptismal Vows is an entry into oneness with Christ. The bottom line is that it is all about Love! The purpose is always to grow in relationship with God: “Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God” (Mt. 5:8). Through penance and the purification of the senses, our hearts and minds are made pure.

3) “For you will that our self-denial should give you thanks, humble our sinful pride, contribute to the feeding of the poor, and so help us imitate you in your kindness” (Lent III).

The Church has always encouraged the uniting of one’s heart with the poor around us who have so much less than we do, whether that is food, luxury, comfort, etc. The reason behind our self-denial is to move our center from ourselves over to God and others; from being self-centered and self-reliant to centering all our life on God and thus serve him in the poorest of the poor. This is not simply an option in the Christian spiritual life, a kind of one spirituality among many, rather this is the fruit of all Christian spirituality. Pope Francis wrote in his Lenten Message:

In the corporal works of mercy we touch the flesh of Christ in our brothers and sisters who need to be fed, clothed, sheltered, visited; in the spiritual works of mercy – counsel, instruction, forgiveness, admonishment and prayer – we touch more directly our own sinfulness. The corporal and spiritual works of mercy must never be separated. By touching the flesh of the crucified Jesus in the suffering, sinners can receive the gift of realizing that they too are poor and in need (“I desire mercy, and not sacrifice [Mt 9:13]: The works of mercy on the road of the Jubilee,” [Lenten Message 2016](#)).

A little sacrifice and penance grounds us, even if in the smallest of ways, in the profound truth of how “rich” we are and how great our need is to identify in some way with the less fortunate. What should guide us in the choice of what sacrifice or little penance I should make? Is it not the awareness of where I need to grow, where I am the weakest, and, thus, where I am sinful, needy, and poor?

In this vein, I want to say a word about redemptive suffering. When we deny ourselves, or suffer some physical or emotional difficulty, and offer that suffering up to the Lord for the intention of another, there is efficacious power to what we are enduring. “Offer it up” as my dear mother would say - this of course did not make sense for a couple of decades, but now it does. When we are able to offer up for others the sacrifices either imposed by ourselves or the daily hardships of life, we are making that suffering a prayer for another and thus it is redemptive. Archbishop Fulton Sheen used to lament that wasted suffering was such a tragedy.

4) “For through bodily fasting you restrain our faults, raise up our minds, and bestow both virtue and its rewards, through Christ our Lord” (Lent IV). Another way to think of it is that it is a movement from *Kenosis* to *Theosis*. Our deliberate and conscious self-emptying leads us into closer communion with God, being more God-like or to use a term from our Eastern tradition: divinization, deification, or *Theosis* as seen in 2 Pet. 1:3-4 when we become “sharers in his divine nature.” *Kenosis* leading to *Theosis* is the process of a worshiper becoming free of *hamartía* (“missing the mark”), and being more united with God (cf. also Heb 12:10). Penance and fasting are meant to lead us away from sin by learning to say “no” to our every wont and desire so as to learn to say “no” to temptation when it comes our way. Remember, at the same time, we are not Pelagians, it is not of our own power that we conquer sin in our lives and earn

God's love, rather God is the one who, in Christ, draws us to Himself, and in fasting we're opening ourselves up to His merciful love. Back to my favorite quote of Pope Leo, and the addition of the second half: "That which the Christian should be doing at all times should be done now with greater care and devotion, *so that* the Lenten fast enjoined by the apostles may be fulfilled, not simply by abstinence from food but above all by the renunciation of sin."

So what are some practical ways we can offer up a fast and do penance during Lent? Remember first and foremost penance needs to be done with love and for Love Himself.

- Something that we have practically lost since the time of Vatican II is that every Friday is still a penitential day: If we are not abstaining from meat, we are to offer another appropriate penance to remind us of the sacred nature of the day upon which the Savior died (cf. *CIC* 1250).
- We know that Ash Wednesday and Good Friday are not only days of abstinence but also of fasting (two small meals not equaling the size of the larger). The Fridays of Lent are days of abstinence from meat.
- Use the Lenten focus to conquer a bad habit - give up something that is not good for you in the first place.
- Do a "heroic minute" first thing in the morning [explained].
- Limit media usage (TV, internet usage, Facebook, movies)
 - As one of our spiritual directors noted to me: "In this world of abundance of information at the tip of our fingers, there is a need to feel comfortable with our poverty of not being able to know it all. Fasting from being connected all the time may better prepare us to receive from Wisdom HIMSELF, for we are more open to receive from our poverty than from abundance. Then we will be truly wise and rich."
- Offer up sweets or soda or coffee (a classic example)
- Joyfully offer up the pains in the midst of your day, and have a daily intention upon which to focus.
- Doing my utmost to pay attention in class; assiduously fulfill my reading duties; go the extra mile with someone with whom I find difficulty
- Pray the Stations of the Cross on Fridays or even daily.
- Don't forget the Eucharistic Fast!
- There are many other suggestions that you can discuss with your spiritual director and friends of consciously curbing idle chatter, using stairs (instead of escalators), focusing on your prayer life anew, not to mention a renewed focus on the corporal and spiritual works of mercy.
- I would also suggest reading and reflecting on the Pope's Message for Lent this year ([hyperlinked above](#)).
- Go deeper and do it better. Lent is not about more, it is about a growing daily prayer life and walk with Christ.

Remember though sometimes a greater good is to forgo a particular sacrifice for the sake of the other. For example, if you have been invited to a dinner and your host has made *tres leches* particularly for you, instead of refusing, simply take a small portion out of kindness (I actually love it when this happens!). You could apply this principle to various circumstances without completely justifying never doing anything.

I would like to give one beautiful example of the power of fasting for particular intentions [example of the Dan and Cari].

My own bishop states it well: “At its core, Lent is about *metanoia* – that is, a deep and sincere change of heart. Any practice, like fasting, which is embraced during this season, should lead to a change that will hopefully last a lifetime” ([*A Supplement to the 2007 Pastoral Letter from Bishop Robert N. Lynch: Lent 2010*](#)).

May our Lenten sacrifices not just be for a season, but lead us closer to Christ throughout the year as we move from *Kenosis* to *Theosis*.