

A TIME OF PENANCE, PURIFICATION AND CONVERSION

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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, of the Holy Spirit, Amen. My Lord and my God, I firmly believe that you are here, that you see me, that you hear me. I adore you with profound reverence. I ask your pardon for my sins and the grace to make this time of prayer fruitful. My Immaculate Mother, St. Joseph, my father and lord, my guardian angel, intercede for me.

Jesus, as we fix our attention on you in the tabernacle, we humbly ask you that this traditional time of grace, in preparation of your Paschal Mystery, be a time of conversion, many conversions, and transformation. We reflect on the goal of every spiritual undertaking, every spiritual effort– the goal ultimately is to be a saint, to be able to say with St. Paul, "It is no longer I that live but Christ who lives in me." In the presence of Jesus, we ask you, Lord, what do you want me to do, in terms of denying myself, making sacrifices, in a certain sense, imposing the cross upon myself not out of a sense of stoicism or a test of how strong my will is or even a sense of toughening myself up? If the goal isn't union with Christ and participating in his very everlasting life that takes the form of joy, let's call the whole thing off and party and have a good time in this life. As I superficially summarize St. Paul when he said, if there's no Resurrection, I'm going to eat and drink and be merry because imposing asceticism for stoicism sake, at least for St. Paul, was insanity. He was gonna make do with the time he had here on Earth to eat, drink, and be merry if that Resurrection didn't happen. But we firmly believe that it did happen, and we firmly believe, using an idea of Pope Francis in his encyclical on sanctity, that we want to be extensions of that heart of Jesus in the middle of the world. How do I do that?

We need to share directly in Our Lord's *kenosis*– *kenosis*– referring to St. Paul's Letter to the Philippians 2:5-7, *kenosis* means *self-emptying*, that to get to know Jesus, we need to share in his self-emptying. And as we contemplate his true presence in the tabernacle, we intuit why self-denial is indispensable, why self-emptying is an essential part of getting to know Jesus. Only when that Paschal Mystery, that supreme sacrifice on the Cross is re-presented, re-enacted, only then does Jesus become truly and totally present, perfect man and perfect God. Analogously, to the degree that I share, and it's more sentiment than disposition than in a given moment and agonizing Cross, to the degree that I share in his self-emptying, I reach a point where I can honestly say, it is no longer I that live, but Christ who lives in me.

How do I exercise that self-emptying? Though a bit intimidating, the saints throughout the history of the Church have stated under no uncertain terms that any serious disciple must find Christ through the Cross. We can take our pick– St. John of the Cross, St. Teresa of Avila, St. Josemaria, St. John Paul, Mother Teresa, Sister Faustina– in order to find Jesus, we need to embrace our Cross. And maybe our weaker side says, and we will have a weaker side, I can handle most of the gospel. It's that suffering part, that self-denial part that

gets me every time. I'm naturally not good at embracing suffering. Our collective reaction can be, well, join the club. No one in his or her right mind is going to revel and rejoice in a severe migraine or the flu or a broken ankle, or the loss of a loved one. But it's not in the actual pain or discomfort that allows us to share in Jesus' emptying. Though suffering is the raw material, it is that will, that freedom, that desire, to want to join Christ in his self-emptying, it's that desire to want to be purified in such a way so that we're more focused on Jesus Christ so that we are freer to incarnate the Gospel.

Today's Gospel gives us three main ways to become purified. In a sense, we create the staging area upon which the Holy Spirit molds us into that image of Jesus Christ. They're three necessary means to connect with the Lord— it's prayer, it's fasting, it's almsgiving/deeds of mercy. The other side of the same coin, which is to become more intimately united to Christ, is to spread the gospel. In my Liturgy of the Hours, on the Feast of, or Memorial of St. Boniface, in that second reading of the Office of Readings, St. Boniface, who is the evangelizer of part of modern-day Germany, he evangelized— died a martyr. He was going against the grain, and in this piece— homily, perhaps, part of a treatise, he did some research to see if the saints of old, the evangelizers of old, of the very early Church were dispensed from the Cross. And he stated: "No, this is not a reality that you can avoid if you want to be holy and if you want to spread the seeds of the gospel. This embracing of the Cross and in the form of— of self-denial, of self-imposed penance is absolutely necessary to radiate that life of Jesus."

Recall one of the biographies of St. Josemaria, and after a little bit more than ten years of praying to the Lord and to the Blessed Mother, to see his calling, finally, that ten year plus plea was honored and answered and he saw Opus Dei, which I interpret as tantamount to seeing Jesus Christ in the modern world in a new way, or a first time way. And he receives a grace or charism, that if it's lived, Christ will be, little by little, in the heart of the modern world. It's quite an ideal. It reflects, it echoes the divine commission to witness the gospel to the ends of the Earth. And within this light he intuited— I don't know what the right word is because there's an illumination, that if the man and the woman of the— in the middle of the world, priest and religious as well, embrace holiness in a serious way, that they strive for sainthood, sanctity, Christ will be brought to the middle of the world. It's not, *maybe*, it will happen. Christ is the victory that overcomes the world through sanctity. And what are the means, what did he do?

Well, he imposed and he said, this is not the norm. We should offer generously many small acts of self-denial. And if we're gonna do something a little bit more extraordinary, that we get permission from a prudent spiritual guide. But at least in his case, being the founder and getting this light off the— off the ground or materializing into an actual spread of the gospel, to begin to bring Christ into the world, he spent hours and hours in prayer, incessant prayer to the Blessed Mother, and very rigorous acts of penance, of fasting, of imposing discomfort upon himself— sleeping on the floor, etc.— and little— lots of little acts of penance. And there was a little, I got the impression there's a little tension between him and his spiritual director, that he was afraid that the spiritual director would say no to some of the penances he wanted to impose upon himself. And he clarified to the spiritual director that this is very necessary to push this

mobilization of ordinary Christians. For the sake of evangelizing the modern world, this necessitated a demanding life of penance.

So, one resolution we want to make, and no need to bite off more than we could chew, a realistic resolution, because love grows in little spurts. Holiness is not the work of a moment but rather work with it a lifetime, to quote St. Josemaria, that we commit ourselves to meditating on the life of Jesus, to adoring Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, a resolution to use his words, his life, as the steady diet of our quiet time with the Lord, that we fix a set time and a set place, ideally a chapel, a Church, but it could be a room, it could be walking through a city, whatever fits our situation or circumstances, that we do that. Fasting— literally, it means giving up food as a way of imposing mortification, discomfort upon oneself. But that fasting is very expansive. It's not limited to denying ourselves of candy or ice cream or dessert, but it's a fasting of our comfort, it's the fasting of our pride. It's the fasting of routines that distract us from God. It's fasting from sensuality, looking at the wrong things. So, we want to see what the Lord what- what do I want to do?

And again, it bears repeating. I remember meeting a couple of nice teenagers... How's Lent going? Great. Well, they said, great. And I said, Can you elaborate a little bit? Yeah, I'm- I haven't had candy for the past two and a half weeks. I have a pretty good record. So far, so good. That was last year. And I said, Okay, good. And what else? He said, Don't you think that's enough? I said, No. I said, you're not going to get close to God just by giving up chocolate. I mean, the Lord is not glorified because you're not eating candy. We have to figure this out so that you are really close to God. I said, How about the prayer piece? How about the charity with others? No- I'm just, that's, that's all I'm doing for Lent. And there's a lot of goodwill. And these two teens were willing to do more, though they needed reminding that the purpose of Lent was not to see how strong of a will we have.

So, we go back to that self-denial. The younger people tell me, I asked them what- give me some ideas, what would be a good idea for self-denial. And some say, well, food is the easy one. The hard one is social media, checking text messages, habitually surfing the net. And that is a good one because we need to deny ourselves of distractions, or inordinate distractions, so that I could focus on prayer and I could focus on paying attention to others, dealing with others, talking to others. So, the younger generation have told me in many instances that the self-denial regarding the internet, the phone, Facebook, Instagram, etc. is a good and challenging penance and a penance that leads to a more profound interior life.

Thirdly, all three have to go together, and one of the fathers- Fathers of the Church, St. Peter Crysologus, which we priests read in the Office of Readings in the middle of Lent, and he makes it abundantly clear, and he's preaching to the infant Church, fourth century, he says that these three means of dealing with God have to be performed. We can't just resolve to pray and neglect self-denial and mercy. We can't just deny ourselves of comforts and simply- and leave it at that. He says all three need to be present, otherwise our Lenten observances do not meet the purpose they were designed to meet and the result never comes. The result is the greater intimacy with Christ being a brighter light of Christ. And what Peter Crysologus was stressing, that the whole area of mercy that is underneath the heading of almsgiving, that has to be

paramount in our Lenten observances, that, and there are a number of levels, I would say, the level of family and friends— it sounds rather trite, perhaps doesn't sound very challenging, to engage people, give them rapt attention, listen, draw them out.

I recall people I know who had the fortune to speak with St. John Paul. They had all very similar experiences that you felt you were the most important person, that he had nothing better to do than talk to you, and he was totally interested. That's another dimension and has to be there— prayer, self-denial, and deeds of kindness. So that, with family and friends, and I say- I emphasize family because love is hierarchical, but also we get used to one another. It can be the smile, could be the hello, it could be the listening ear, it could be drawing somebody out, or it could be making conversation. Our friends as well, that we know how to be there for them, that we make time for them, that we spend time with them, because only through the medium of conversation and a sharing of mutual inner selves does the bond of love grow, spending one on one time with people. And I'm not saying, you know, disregard one's professional work, that's certainly not the point, but all of us, as we examine ourselves and pray about beginning this time of Lent on this Ash Wednesday, we need to improve in loving with that heart of Jesus.

Notice that in the gospel that we're supposed to not draw attention to ourselves when we pray and we can't look like we're fasting or ready to pass out or- because we're so famished, or when we make a donation we announce it to the four corners of the world. But Jesus is saying that we have a smile on our face, that- that's another great form of self-denial. And it kind of embraces both, I'd say, fasting and deeds of mercy. And then to find opportunities for corporal works of mercy. We could start with our own family and friends, those who are sick, those who are lonely, that we find time for them. It's being available for the needs of others. So, all of us in the intimacy of his or her personal prayer, want to come up with what do I need to be purified? What do I need to be transformed? What must I do to get closer to Jesus?

And lastly, what's the theology behind the theme of Ash Wednesday and the rest of Lent? And that theme, the ashes remind us of the shortness of life because we were made out of dust and dust we shall return. But also that the ashes remind us that we have to die to our selfishness so that Christ's life rises in us. The- so we- we want to make good use of this, and it's not a question of perfect record, that the humble and contrite heart throughout Lent should be the backdrop at the same time. And we welcome this. What do we want? We want, with the grace of God, to get rid of those obstacles that hold me back from being Christ-like.

We finish up our prayer thanking the Lord for this opportunity to change, to repent, to grow in sanctity, to be purified, so that the life of Christ grow more effectively, to let the Lord prune those extraneous branches so that we bear the fruit of Jesus' love, Jesus' peace, Jesus' joy, and that we attract other people to Christ. As they contemplate, I'll be it, in the imperfect way the life of Christ which is a fruit of our Lenten prayer, self-denial, and these adversity. Mary, we put the sentiments in your hands, we entrust our Lent to you so it'd be an effective time of conversion and transformation.

I thank you, my God, for the good resolutions, affections, and inspirations you've communicated to me in this meditation. I ask your help to put them into effect. My Immaculate Mother, St. Joseph, my father and lord, my guardian angel, intercede for me.



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