

ST. JOSEMARIA INSTITUTE PODCAST

LENT: A TIME FOR CONVERSION

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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and 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 beg 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.

We begin our prayer today on Ash Wednesday by taking a closer look at the second reading of today's Mass. We will read these words from the Second Letter to the Corinthians: "On behalf of Christ, therefore, we are acting as ambassadors; God, as it were, appealing through us. We exhort you, for Christ's sake, be reconciled to God. For our sake, he made himself to be sin who knew nothing of sin, so that in him we might become the justice of God. Yes, working together with him, we entreat you not to receive the grace of God in vain. For he says, 'In an acceptable time, I have heard you and in the day of salvation I have helped you.' Behold, now is the acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation."

These words of Saint Paul to the Corinthians are very powerful indeed because they tell us that the grace of conversion, the grace of reconciliation with God, is given to us now. Now is the day of salvation, now is an acceptable time. For what? For conversion, to convert, you and me can turn to the Lord. And our Lord gives us time to do so, He gives us, in fact, beginning today, a season, an entire season of the year, of the liturgical year, characterized by acts of penance and symbols of penance such as ashes. And we will go through this time accompanying Our Lord as he went through those forty days and forty nights in the desert or as the Israelites went through forty years in the desert approaching the Promised Land.

This is the acceptable time. This is the day of salvation. Now. It's interesting that angels, they cannot convert, they don't live in time, at least not in the way we do. And therefore when they make one decision, it's permanent. They were given one choice, whether to accept God, whether to worship God, or to worship themselves, really. And those who chose to accept God, they entered into Heavenly bliss immediately. And those who did not were sent, were kicked out of Heaven, were sent to the the place of perdition, Hell.

And that's where the angels who did not accept God live in this kind of agony that, because they will never see God and somehow they cannot repent because their choice was definitive. But we, human beings, we live in time and somehow a time of salvation is a time of conversion. We can actually repent from our actions, from our sins. If we make a bad choice, we can convert from that, we can at some point later in time say, "I do not wish to be identified with that action of mine. I wish I had never done it. And in fact, I will try to undo it as best as I can with subsequent actions." That is what we want to do during Lent as we begin this acceptable time for conversion.

We have to thank you, Lord, because you have given us an opportunity to purify ourselves and to identify ourselves with your suffering. You have taken the hit for us, you have paid the price so that we could be redeemed and when we see the great mercy that has been bestowed upon us we want to voluntarily participate a little bit in that, even though our meager efforts will never be able to match your love, the love that you have for us and your power, the power to redeem us. But since we are now sorry for what we have caused you, we want to now try to make up for it by living this time of penance.

St. Josemaria would say that the life of a child of God, it could be a moment of great conversion where we see in a very clear way that we have to leave behind a worldly lifestyle and attitude, and we may have big, even showy conversion, we change our lifestyle. But he said that throughout our lives we will have successive conversions that may not be so flashy. But they are more important because they are deeper.

Those are the ones that happen within our heart when we repent of our sins in a deeper way perhaps, for sins that were perhaps not as big but we realize, because now we have the eyes of love, we realize how much a little sin, even if that could exist, hurts Our Lord and with the eyes of love, not of scrupulosity, we want to make up for everything. That's what loved ones do. They don't want any obstacle, no matter how small it may be, to fall between them and their loved one. And that is exactly what we want to grow in, in this sensitivity of love, in this acceptable time of penance, in this time of salvation which we relive in the now and the today of the liturgy, as we go through and wear these ashes on our forehead.

The ashes that we will receive today are a symbol, a symbol of the fact that we want to be more spiritual. The priest or the minister will tell us, "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return." That's one of the options for the imposition of ashes. Ashes remind us of the passing world, the world we are in, not the definitive one; that we have to look higher, that we have to look beyond anything that can give us hope here in this world. We have to realize: yeah, perhaps we are happy in this world because we enjoy it, but we have to know that wherever we look to in this world, we don't have a definitive hope.

We have to look to our Lord, to the spiritual. The ashes remind us that we have to be more spiritual and let go of the merely human as that which gives us hope, even if it's noble, it will run out, that hope will run out. Let's say we hope, we are happy because our career gives us hope, because we will provide for our family and so on, even our careers will come to an end. Even our loved ones will not be with us all the time. And so when they die or when they have to move away, we are reminded that we cannot even place our ultimate happiness on that nearness, of our loved one. We have to look higher, and that is where we have to place our hope in God and that which does not end; in the eternal, in the divine.

Today the Church, in the Gospel of the Mass, will recommend three works of penance: fasting, prayer, and almsgiving. Why do we do these things, you may wonder. Why fast? Why pray? Why

give ourselves or give what we have to others? Well, we can think of many reasons that St. Paul actually lives by in order to identify ourselves more with our Lord. That's the first reason: to live with Christ, to live in Christ. Look at what he says to the Corinthians. He says: "We are cast down, but we do not perish, always bearing about in our body the dying of Jesus so that the life also of Jesus may be made manifest in our bodily frame. For we the living are constantly being handed over to death for Jesus' sake that the life also of Jesus may be made manifest in our mortal flesh. Thus death is at work in us, but life in you."

Well, when we go through these acts of penance we are identifying ourselves with Jesus Christ on the Cross and we are constantly being handed over to death like Jesus was, but at the same time his resurrection is awaiting us. We are living with Christ, we are living in Christ, and we are participating in what he did for us, we do for others. That's why St. Paul says, you know, "death is at work in us but life in you." Because we are dying, you are living. How wonderful is that? We can participate in the life of Christ and in the very mission of Christ.

Another reason that we can think of in order to understand why we should do these difficult things is because we have disordered tendencies since Original Sin. We have inherited this disorder from our first parents. They said 'no' to Our Lord and they lost the state of grace that they were supposed to transmit to us. It's not that they transmitted something, they transmitted to us a lack of something which is that grace which we should have inherited through the family, through the gen- from generation to generation, passed on. That was the plan of God, that was Plan A. Now, we're in Plan B whereby, well, we are born with disordered passion.

But our Lord has redeemed us, has saved us, has paid the price. But we still need to mortify our members. In fact, this is exactly what St. Paul says to the Colossians: "Therefore, mortify your members which are on earth." And what things should we give up? He says, "immorality, uncleanness, lust, evil," excuse me, "evil desire and covetousness, which is a form of idolatry. Because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the unbelievers, and you yourselves once walked in them when they were your life, but now you also put them all away. Anger, wrath, malice, abusive language, foul mouthed utterance. Do not lie to one another. Strip off the old man with his deeds and put on the new one that is being renewed under perfect knowledge according to the image of his Creator."

See, we are now reordering, introducing order back into our very persons, our very selves. We're stripping off the old man with his deeds and putting on the new one which is really a restoring of the image of the Creator as Adam and Eve were a pristine image of the Creator. This is a beautiful thing and it takes effort, takes time. It really takes a conversion, a change of attitude. For this we need reflection, we need silence, we need to think about how we can actually implement the law of God in our lives.

So, how do we do that? Well, look at the Prodigal Son. The Prodigal Son who had squandered his father's property in loose living, he couldn't think when he was actually spending and enjoying

the money. He was just thinking about the pleasures that were there, you know, that he had right in front of him. He wasn't thinking, he wasn't reflecting, he didn't have interior silence. But when all that ran out and there was a famine and he was hungry, he began to reflect. He realized what our Lord would say in, you know, to the devil when the devil tempted him to convert the rocks into bread. He said, "Man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of God."

The Prodigal Son realized, "the meaning of my life does not come from the bread, does not come from the pleasures of of this world, does not come from anything that I can buy with money. There's something more that I need and I'm missing." And the only reason why he began to think about all these things is because he was hungry. You see how fasting helps us to go from the bread here and now that satiates our appetite to the bread that is the Word of God? He begins to think about his father's house.

And we also, when we fast, we begin to be more spiritual or hopefully we are also spiritual. I mean, it's also possible that we fast and it does nothing because we're not thinking, because it really isn't creating that space of interior reflection and silence. In fact, we have to make sure that if it does, it's not in the fasting, it's in the reason *for* the fasting. This is what St. Leo the Great says, "The merit of our fasts does not consist only in abstinence from food. There is no use in depriving the body of nourishment if the soul does not cut itself off from iniquity and if the tongue does not cease to speak evil."

You know, this is a very poignant statement. What we really need to fast from is our evil deeds, our, you know, evil utterances. We have to watch our tongue, watch our thoughts, watch our deeds, that they be done in the Lord. We have to purify. That's what we really have to fast from, and fasting from food helps us to actually fast from those interior things that really deprive us from the life of the Spirit.

"Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God." He says, "Give your pain to God, offer it up." That's what we have to do with our our fasting, offer that up to God and be united in love, in deeds of love with others because that's what fasting is for and if it doesn't work that way, then it's useless, it really is. Fasting takes us to prayer, it leads us to prayer as we can see, it leads the Prodigal Son to thinking and to praying really, it leads him to come back to his father's house. And that's exactly what we need to do as well this Lent, dedicate ourselves to times of prayer.

How do we do that? Well, our Lord says in today's Gospel that we should "go into our room, lock our door, and there pray to our Heavenly Father and he will reward us in secret." Shouldn't pray like the hypocrites who want to be standing there in public and being praised because they're going to be, you know, officially holy people out there. No, they have received their reward but we have to go into our room, close our door, and pray to our Father in secret.

Notice that the way to do this is to get rid of distractions, “close your door.” Our Lord did that at other times, you know, in the Gospel of Matthew later on there’s another passage which has a very similar structure. He dismissed the crowd after the multiplication of the loaves. He went up the mountain by himself to pray and when it was late, he was there alone. He dismissed the crowd: that could be figuratively interpreted as he got rid of distractions. He dismissed the crowd of distraction, of the pleasures of the world. He’s fasting from all the noise and all that. It’s closing of your door, it’s guarding the senses, it’s really living temperance so that we can focus on prayer, on what is important.

And then he went up the mountain. What does this mean? Well, this is the elevation of the soul, elevation of the mind and heart. We have to elevate our soul when we pray. “Lift up your hearts,” we say at Mass. What does this mean? It means that we have to get rid of earthly thoughts: our gripes, our anger, our, you know, what we’re going to do, even what we’re going to do tomorrow, what we’re going to do today after this. No, we have to focus on Heavenly things, not thinking anything else whether good or bad or indifferent, we have to focus on Our Lord.

And what St. Paul recommends, he recommends that we really live this purity of mind elevating our minds by thinking of those things that are honorable, those things that are just, those things that are holy, those things that are lovable, those things that are of good repute. He says, “If there is any virtue, anything worthy of praise, think upon these things.” Think about them all the more, meditate upon the Word of God, elevate your mind.

Think of your call, think of what Our Lord wants of you, renounce Satan and his empty promises, and there in the solitude of your heart and you are elevated up with your mind and heart by meditating on the Word of God, there you will be alone with God. You won’t be alone as in, won’t be lonely, but you will be in solitude alone with God, in the silence of God’s presence where you can hear his whisper, you can hear what he wants of you, you can hear where he really wants you to convert and to give to others, to give yourself, to forget about yourself, forget about myself. There we will hear the whisper of God, it’s not loud, it’s very, very, very soft.

That’s what we want to do, to pray. But for this we have to make time, which requires effort, but anything that we really want to do we make time for. Have you ever noticed that? What you really want to do, you do no matter what. You really want to watch the football game? Somehow you watch it, you never miss the Super Bowl, you never miss your favorite team’s final game. Why? Because you really want to do it. If we really want to fast, we will do it, we’ll make it happen. If we really want to pray, we will make it happen. We will make an appointment with Our Lord and it will be something that will be life-changing.

Like Moses, we will come down from the mountain enlightened because we have been there with Our Lord, and more than the Burning Bush, we will see Our Lord on Mount Calvary as he dies on the Cross for us and that will enlighten us, that will be the burning, the new Burning Bush for us, not because he’s burning with fire, but because he’s burning with love within. His heart is burning with desires to set us a flame. That’s what’s gonna happen with our prayer.

There is a third recommendation this Lent, a third thing we are encouraged to do by the Church in order to convert, and that is almsgiving, to give of what we have. Of course, this means that we should give money, you know, to the poor, to the Church. We should help others who don't have, share of our property to others. But again, that's its most external and immediate manifestation and perhaps, you know, to a first approximation the first thing we gotta do, but it also means giving that which is internal, that which is spiritual.

Perhaps it's not, it's not tangible like giving time to others, listening to others, understanding others; that's almsgiving, that's a spiritual almsgiving. This is probably more difficult because smiling when we don't want to, smiling at someone when it's difficult, smile at them because we don't like them is more difficult than giving a million dollars. We'd rather do that than be with them. This is the true almsgiving.

Mother Teresa of Calcutta, when asked by a donor how much he should give, she answered immediately, she said, "give 'til it hurts. Give 'til it hurts." That's the right measure, whatever that is for you. Now, of course, all these things we should practice in small things, we are not going to be able to do great works of penance or mercy or, you know, we're not going to be a martyr, most likely not, although it could happen. St. Josemaria taught that all these things can be lived with great love if we do ordinary, if we just fulfill our ordinary duties.

And so we have to ask ourselves, "What is within my arms' reach to do?" Could it be, for instance, giving up dessert every day in Lent, that could be a good thing, a little mortification at meals. Could it be setting up a time of prayer, fifteen to twenty minutes in the morning? Maybe another fifteen or so in the evening? Could it be going to Mass or praying the rosary? Whatever it may be, you have to decide; that has to fit like a glove into your schedule. But, as St. Augustine says:

"School yourselves in almsgiving, in fasting, in prayer. These are the means of purging ourselves of the daily sins, the small sin, which we cannot help creeping into our thoughts because of our human weakness. Don't shrug them aside because they are small; fear them rather because they are many. Listen, my brothers, these sins are tiny, they aren't big ones. This is no wild beast like a lion to tear your throat out like with one bite, but it's often the case that many tiny beasts can kill if someone's thrown into the fleet pit, doesn't he die there? They're not very big, it is true. But human nature is weak and can be destroyed even by the tiniest creatures. So it is with little sin."

You see, it's these little things that we do that really take away our love of God if they accumulate and by little mortifications, by little acts of penance, we will be able to undo them with the grace of God, of course. Well, this is our mission. Let us ask Our Lady for a deep conversion, for a deep conversion, and let's not ask her for just one conversion, let's ask her for a conversion every single day. So that every single day we may say, "I am now closer to God than yesterday." That should be our goal every night, that we may be able to say that, and she will grant us that because she knows that we are her children. We have been entrusted to her at the foot of the Cross and therefore she now has a responsibility to guide us and to keep us especially close to her and close to her Son on Calvary.

I thank you my God for the good resolutions, affections, and inspirations which you have 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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