

SIN, REPENTANCE, AND PENANCE
Lenten Meditation—I
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Introduction

The greatest event that turned the course of human history was the death of Jesus Christ on the Cross. That supreme sacrifice served to bridge the formidable gulf which separated man from man and man from God. Its far-reaching consequences revolutionized the whole philosophy of life and brought a new dimension to human destiny. In fact it turned the world upside down. Its impact has been so profound and perennial that even after 2006 years this epoch-making event is still meditated upon and pondered over by the entire world irrespective of religion, culture, and climate.

The strange things happened in the nature and in the bystanders at Jesus' death gives some important clues to the unique significance of this great event. The gospels say:
"It was now about noon and darkness came over the whole earth until three in the afternoon because of an eclipse of the sun" (Lk. 23:44).

"But Jesus cried out again in a loud voice, and gave up his spirit. And behold, the veil of the sanctuary was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth quaked, rocks were split, tombs were opened, and the bodies of many saints who had fallen asleep were raised. And coming forth from their tombs after his resurrection, they entered the holy city and appeared to many. The centurion and the men with him who were keeping watch over Jesus feared greatly when they saw the earthquake and all that was happening, and they said, "Truly, this was the Son of God!" (Mt. 27:50-54).

"Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit"; and when he had said this he breathed his last. The centurion who witnessed what had happened glorified God and said, "This man was innocent & beyond doubt." When all the people who had gathered for this spectacle saw what had happened, they returned home beating their breasts" (Lk. 23: 46-48).

What a tremendous change Jesus' death has brought about in human perspective! The most significant one is the incredible change that took place in the hearts of people, the conversion of his most hardened enemies. The very sergeant who unleashed the worst process of torture and torment upon Jesus culminating in his death repented and announced his conversion publicly. The soldiers who tortured the Lord for the past 12 continuous hours with unimaginable cruelty expressed their sorrow and belief in Jesus. The crowd who cried out in unison: "crucify him, crucify him" felt remorse over their folly and beat their breasts! The Scripture says that at first both the criminals on either side of Jesus, were abusing Him alike. (" Those who were crucified with him also kept abusing him"--Mk. 15:32). But later the one hanging on the right, changed his mind and put his trust in the crucified Lord. ("Now one of the criminals hanging there reviled Jesus, saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us." The other, however, rebuking him, said in reply, "Have you no fear of God, for you are subject to the same condemnation? And indeed, we have been condemned justly, for the sentence we received corresponds to our crimes, but this man has done nothing criminal." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." He replied to him, "Amen, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise").

"When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to myself (Jn. 12:32) " This prophecy was fulfilled at his death. The human mind that had been in rebellion against God from the time of Adam's sin, is now redeemed and reconciled. The human heart that was once self-centered and sinful now turned penitent and God-seeking. Thus, Jesus' death served as the source and the means of repentance for every one through space and time.

This is the reason why the early Church oriented its preaching centered round the Death and resurrection of Christ. In fact, the power of St. Peter's sermon on the Pentecost day that led to the instant conversion of 3000 people lay in the irresistible power of the Death and Resurrection of the Lord. Peter said, *"Therefore let the whole house of Israel know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified."* Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and they asked Peter and the other apostles, *"What are we to do, my brothers?" ... Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand persons were added that day"(Acts. 2:36-37, 41).* The power behind St. Paul's incredible ministry was also the same. Knowing well that the central theme of a Crucified Christ might sound stupid to the Gentiles, Paul, the very Apostle of Gentiles, the one who converted millions and millions of them to Christianity, insisted that he would preach only about the Crucified Christ: *"Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to*

Gentiles”(I Cor. 1: 22-23). He even confessed that the Crucified Christ is the only topic of his study and research: “ *I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified*” (I Cor. 2:2).

Jesus’ death and Resurrection are not incidents buried in the past. They have tremendous redeeming power to flow back to the past and move forward to the last person to live in this world. In other words, since “*Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever*”(Heb. 13:8), the merits of His death and resurrection are accessible to every one, no matter when and where he lives, whether at the time of Jesus or after. Pope John Paul in his apostolic letter ‘Rosarium Virginis Mariae’ substantiates this point: “The Bible is an account of saving events culminating in Christ himself. These events not only belong to “yesterday”; *they are also part of the “today” of salvation*. This even green nature of Jesus’ redemptive power appears in greater detail in the Liturgy: what God accomplished centuries ago did not only affect the direct witnesses of those events; it continues to affect people in every age with its gift of grace. To some extent this is also true of every other devout approach to those events: to “remember” them in a spirit of faith and love is to be open to the grace which Christ won for us by the mysteries of his life, death and resurrection” (RVM #13).

Therefore, meditation on the Passion, Death and Resurrection of Christ gives us the merits which Jesus won for us through those Redeeming Acts ! This is why Lent becomes the harvest time of grace, because, during this season, the Church ponders over the redemptive sufferings of our Savior over and over again with greater zeal and fervor.

Passion of Christ leads to Conversion

Catechism of the Catholic Church says: “It is in discovering the greatness of God’s love that our heart is shaken by the horror and weight of sin and begins to fear offending God by sin and being separated from him. The human heart is converted by looking upon him whom our sins have pierced” (ccc 1432).

The greatest expression of God’s love and mercy is Jesus’ Passion and Death: “*God is love. In this way the love of God was revealed to us: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might have life through him. In this is love: not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as expiation for our sins*”(I Jn.4:9-10).

The natural consequence of this tremendous love is life-transforming repentance. This is what is exemplified in changing attitude of those hostile eye-witness to the heart-rending scene of Jesus’ agonizing death on the cross at Calvary. This is the reason why the violent Saul was converted instantly. “*Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?...I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting*”(Act.9:4-5)—it is this lamentation of the Risen Christ that turned Saul’s life upside down. Hence St. Paul later wrote: “*Or do you hold his priceless kindness, forbearance, and patience in low esteem, unaware that the kindness of God would lead you to repentance? By your stubbornness and impenitent heart, you are storing up wrath for yourself for the day of wrath and revelation of the just judgment of God, who will repay everyone according to his works*”(Rom. 2:4-6).

The reason is, as the *Catechism quoted above states* (CCC 1432), this infinite love of God expressed in the death of Jesus makes clear to us the real horror and weight of sin. Because Jesus’ giving his life on the cross was the exact price he voluntarily gave to liberate us from the eternal punishment that we merited by our sin. “*You were ransomed from your futile conduct, handed on by your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold but with the precious blood of Christ as of a spotless unblemished lamb*” (I Pet. 1:18-19). The horrible Passion of Christ reveals how terrible the sin is. The Catechism speaks of it thus: “It is precisely in the Passion, when the mercy of Christ is about to vanquish it, that sin most clearly manifests its violence and its many forms: unbelief, murderous hatred, shunning and mockery by the leaders and the people, Pilate’s cowardice and the cruelty of the soldiers, Judas’ betrayal - so bitter to Jesus, Peter’s denial and the disciples’ flight. However, at the very hour of darkness, the hour of the prince of this world, the sacrifice of Christ secretly becomes the source from which the forgiveness of our sins will pour forth inexhaustibly” (CCC 1851).

The Passion and Death of Christ not only reveals to us the horror and weight of sin, but fills our hearts with love for God which leads us to conversion. This is the work of Grace.

Sin to be uncovered

In order that that we may be able to appreciate the greatness of God’s mercy fully, we need to uncover our sins and see them as they really are. The *Catechism* underlines the necessity of uncovering our sin for its permanent healing: “As St. Paul affirms, “Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more.” But to do its work grace must uncover sin so as to convert our hearts and bestow on us “righteousness to

eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." Like a physician who probes the wound before treating it, God, by his Word and by his Spirit, casts a living light on sin. Conversion *requires convincing of sin*; it includes the interior judgment of the conscience, and this, being a proof of the action of the Spirit of truth in man's inmost being, becomes at the same time the start of a new grant of grace and love" (ccc1848).

And the Bible says that this free gift of salvation, this mercy of God offered to us become really ours only when we acknowledge and confess our sins: "*If we say, "We are without sin," we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we acknowledge our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from every wrongdoing. If we say, "We have not sinned," we make him a liar, and his word is not in us"* (1 Jn. 1:8-10).

Consciousness of Sin is necessary to uncover sin and repent

If a person is not aware that the particular thing he does is a sin, how can he acknowledge that sin and confess it. Therefore, in order to uncover one's sin one must first become conscious of his sin. There is a great danger of losing sin-consciousness today because we are living in an age that justifies every sin. Relativism is gaining an upper hand. Many of the fundamental values are questioned more than ever before! This makes getting a true awareness of sin very difficult.

The most fundamental command of God was "*The LORD God gave man this order: "You are free to eat from any of the trees of the garden except the tree of knowledge of good and bad. From that tree you shall not eat; the moment you eat from it you are surely doomed to die"*(Gen.2:16-17). It was a command reserving to God (alone) the right to decide good and evil, because man is not capable of doing that. Adam and Eve disobeyed that very command and it brought so much harm to humanity! Today's growing trend of deciding good and evil independently is far more dangerous than we can imagine.

Picturing evil as good is the greatest obstacle to consciousness of sin

To pronounce an act "good" which is evil in fact, is far more serious than to actually commit it with the consciousness that it is a sin. Because, a person who commits an evil with the consciousness that it is a sin has the possibility to repent about it in future and correct it. On the contrary, a person who thinks of a sinful act otherwise, even though he does not commit that sin now, may easily commit it in future with no chance of correcting it later in life.

Giving the label of good to evil is highly despicable

That is why the Bible is very harsh on those who judge an evil act as good: "*Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil, who change darkness into light, and light into darkness, who change bitter into sweet, and sweet into bitter! Woe to those who are wise in their own sight, and prudent in their own esteem! Woe to the champions at drinking wine, the valiant at mixing strong drink! To those who acquit the guilty for bribes, and deprive the just man of his rights! Therefore, as the tongue of fire licks up stubble, as dry grass shrivels in the flame, Even so their root shall become rotten and their blossom scatter like dust; For they have spurned the law of the LORD of hosts, and scorned the word of the Holy One of Israel. Therefore the wrath of the LORD blazes against his people, he raises his hand to strike them"*(Is. 5:20-25).

Only well-formed conscience can direct rightly

There is a tendency in us to think that our sense of values is absolutely correct. The reason we raise is that we have a conscience and we act according to our conscience; and after all, is not conscience the voice of God? Of course, we can trust our conscience if it is formed according to proper standards. *Catechism* says: "Conscience must be informed and moral judgment enlightened. A well-formed conscience is upright and truthful. It formulates its judgments according to reason, in conformity with the true good willed by the wisdom of the Creator. The education of conscience is indispensable for human beings who are subjected to negative influences and tempted by sin to prefer their own judgment and to reject authoritative teachings" (ccc 1783). "The education of the conscience is a lifelong task. From the earliest years, it awakens the child to the knowledge and practice of the interior law recognized by conscience. Prudent education teaches virtue; it prevents or cures fear, selfishness and pride, resentment arising from guilt, and feelings of complacency, born of human weakness and faults. The education of the conscience guarantees freedom and engenders peace of heart" (ccc 1784).

Difference in values renders the possibility to err greater.

The fact that worldly values are contrary to right values makes the problem more serious. The Bible clearly demarcates differentiating line: "*Jesus said, "You justify yourselves in the sight of others, but God knows your hearts; for what is of human esteem is an abomination in the sight of God"*(Lk. 16:15). "My

thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD. As high as the heavens are above the earth, so high are my ways above your ways and my thoughts above your thoughts” (Is. 55:8).

Word of God is to be the basis.

Since our conscience may not necessarily be well formed, and also there is a likelihood of it having been influenced by worldly values in its formation, we should make sure that our judgement of good and evil is to be based on the Word of God and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The Catechism insists on that very much: “ In the formation of conscience the Word of God is the light for our path, we must assimilate it in faith and prayer and put it into practice. We must also examine our conscience before the Lord’s Cross. We are assisted by the gifts of the Holy Spirit, aided by the witness or advice of others and guided by the authoritative teaching of the Church.” (ccc 1785).

St. Paul says that it is God’s Law that makes us know that we have sinned: “What the Law does is to make us know that we have sinned” (Rom. 3: 20b).

Commandments of God shed light on Sin

The Ten Commandments are the quintessence of the entire Law of God. Hence, its is the reflection on the Ten Commandments that helps us in making right judgement of good and evil. That is why traditionally the Church has prescribed the Ten Commandments as the touch-stones. But for a flawless judgment, a thorough study of the implications of each commandment is necessary. The fact that Catechism deals at length with the Ten Commandments shows that they are so crucial to a life of righteousness.

The Holy Spirit is the one who produces the right awareness of sin.

It is the Holy Spirit , who creates in us the consciousness of sin. Jesus revealed this truth clearly: *“But I tell you the truth, it is better for you that I go. For if I do not go, the Advocate will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you. And when he comes he will convict the world in regard to sin and righteousness and condemnation: sin, because they do not believe in me; righteousness, because I am going to the Father and you will no longer see me; condemnation, because the ruler of this world has been condemned. “I have much more to tell you, but you cannot bear it now. But when he comes, the Spirit of truth, he will guide you to all truth” (Jn. 16:7-13).*

Therefore, it is to be under the direct guidance of the Holy Spirit and on the basis of the Word of God that we should examine our conscience, find out our sins and repent about them. This is very clearly said in Catechism: “Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more.” But to do its work grace must uncover sin so as to convert our hearts and bestow on us “righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.” Like a physician who probes the wound before treating it, God, by his Word and by his Spirit, casts a living light on sin: Conversion *requires convincing of sin*; it includes the interior judgment of conscience, and this, being a proof of the action of the Spirit of truth in man’s inmost being, becomes at the same time the start of a new grant of grace and love” (ccc 1848).

Therefore, meditation on the LAW of God, the Ten Commandments, is very necessary to get a perfect consciousness of sin that leads to true repentance and reconciliation. Therefore, we should see that we don’t leave out any of the Meditations on the Ten Commandments. Let us take the inspiration for this from King David’s example

“How I love your teaching, Lord! I study it all day long. Your command makes me wiser than my foes, for it is always with me. I have more understanding than all my teachers, because I ponder your decrees. I have more insight than my elders, because I observe your precepts. I keep my steps from every evil path, that I may obey your word. From your edicts I do not turn, for you have taught them to me(Ps. 119:97-102).

“I am a sojourner in the land; do not hide your commands from me. At all times my soul is stirred with longing for your edicts (Ps.119:19-20).

“Lead me from the way of deceit; favor me with your teaching. The way of loyalty I have chosen; I have set your edicts before me”(119: 29-30).

“ Explain your Law to me, and I will obey it. I will keep it with all my heart” (Ps.119:34).

“Open my eyes to see clearly the wonders of your teachings.” (Ps. 119: 18).

“I respect and love your commandments; I will meditate on your instructions”
(Ps. 119: 48)

“I will ponder your precepts and consider your paths. In your laws I take delight; I will never forget your word” (Ps. 119:15-16).

“I will never forget your precepts; through them you give me life. I am yours; save me, for I cherish your precepts” (Ps. 119:93-94).

“I sigh with open mouth, yearning for your commands” (Ps.119:131).

“I rise before dawn and cry out; I put my hope in your words. My eyes greet the night watches as I meditate on your promise” (Ps. 119:147-148).

“At midnight I rise to praise you because your edicts are just. I am the friend of all who fear you, of all who keep your precepts”(Ps. 119:62-63).”

“My eyes shed streams of tears because your teaching is not followed”(Ps. 119:136)

“I will praise you with sincere heart as I study your just edicts” (Ps. 119:7).

“Seven times a day I praise you because your edicts are just” (ps.119:164)

What is Sin?

Sin is an offence against God. Sin sets itself against God’ s love for us and turns our heart away from it.

Sin is disobedience to God’s love! It has a deeper meaning: God’s Law (Commandments) express and defines His covenant with man, the marriage-like relationship of personal intimacy that is the goal for us and the ultimate meaning of our lives. Faith for the Old Testament people meant more than belief. It meant personal fidelity as in marriage. Sin meant the breaking of this intimate relationship: spiritual infidelity or divorce.

Sin sets itself against God’s love for us and turns our heart away from Him. Like the first sin, it is disobedience, a revolt against God through the will to become “like Gods”, knowing and determining good and evil. Sin is thus **“love of oneself even to contempt of God”**

Temptation and Sin

Temptation is nothing else but directing toward evil everything which man can and ought to put to good use. Temptation draws us away from God and directs us in a disordered way toward ourselves and the world. The number and manifold character of our temptations have their basis in that threefold concupiscence of which the first letter of St. John tells us: “ For nothing that the world offers comes from the Father, Carnal allurements, enticements for the eye, the life of empty show—all these are from the world”(1 Jn. 2:16). Here, the “world” from which the Christian should keep away is not creation, the work of God, which was entrusted to the dominion of man, but the symbol and sign of everything which separates from God, that is, the opposite of “God’s kingdom”. They are the three aspects of the world from which the Christian should keep his distance, so as to be faithful to Jesus’ message. They are sensual appetites, excessive hunger for earthly goods—on which man deludes himself that he can build his life—and prideful self-sufficiency in regard to God. The Catholic Living Bible’s translation makes the meaning more clear: *“For all these worldly things, these evil desires—the craze for sex, the ambition to buy everything that appeals to you, and the pride that comes from wealth and importance –these are not from God. They are from this evil world itself”*(In. 2:16).

The “*three concupiscence*” are the three great temptations to which the Christian will be subjected in the course of his earthly life.

Lent’s program

Lent is an exceptional occasion for saving “the inward man” in each of us (Eph. 3:16). He is often forgotten, yet he is created “in justice and holiness” (Eph. 4:24) through the operation of the Sufferings and the Resurrection of Christ.

It reminds us of the way pointed out to us by the Lord with His forty day's fast at the beginning of his messianic mission. It also reminds us that—at whatever point one may be on his earthly path—one must detach oneself from the “threefold desires (I Jn. 2:16), “works of the flesh”(Gal. 5:19), which oppose the Holy Spirit(Acts. 7:51), and so leave room for “the fruit of the Spirit” (Gal. 5:22), by following Christ in prayer and fasting, so far as one is capable.

We have entered lent in order to follow Jesus' example. “For forty days... He was tempted by the devil” (Lk4:1). “During that time He ate nothing” (Lk. 4:2).

Lent is the special time to receive the liberation Christ gives : the liberation from sin, liberation from the desires of the flesh, the concupiscence of eyes, the pride of life, liberation from what coerces man most.

Lent is the time to eagerly listen to the word of God. “ Harden not your hearts” (Ps. 95:8). “ If you hear God's voice today, do not be stubborn” (Heb. 4:7).The Passion and Death of our Lord is the means God speaks to us with penetrating voice. He speaks with His cross and Sacrifice there!

Lent is the time for entering into oneself. It is the period of particular intimacy with God in the secrecy of one's heart and conscience.

Lent is reminder that you are going to die. “*Remember that you are dust and you shall return to dust*”.

Lent is the time for prayer, fasting and almsgiving. It tells us: “ Remember, man, that you are called to other things besides these earthly and material goods, which threaten to divert you from the essential. Remember man, your fundamental vocation: you come from God, you return to God.

Prayer, fasting and almsgiving

Prayer remains always the prime and fundamental condition for approaching God. It is chiefly prayer which gets us away from indifference and makes us sensitive to the things of God and soul. Prayer also educate our consciences. Lent is a particularly apt time for education the conscience.

Almsgiving and fasting are closely linked with each other as means of conversion and Christian penance. *Fasting* means some mastery over ourselves. It means being demanding toward ourselves, being ready to give up something—food, enjoyment and various pleasures. In its broadest and most essential meaning, *almsgiving* is readiness to share joys and sadness with others, to give to one's neighbor, to the needy in particular.

“Jesus' call to conversion and penance, like that of the prophets before him, does not aim first at outward works, “sackcloth and ashes,” fasting and mortification, but at the *conversion of the heart, interior conversion*. Without this, such penances remain sterile and false; however, interior conversion urges expression in visible signs, gestures and works of penance(ccc 1430)

Interior repentance is a radical reorientation of our whole life, a return, a conversion to God with all our heart, an end of sin, a turning away from evil, with repugnance toward the evil actions we have committed. At the same time it entails the desire and resolution to change one's life, with hope in God's mercy and trust in the help of his grace. This conversion of heart is accompanied by a salutary pain and sadness which the Fathers called *animi cruciatus* (affliction of spirit) and *compunctio cordis* (repentance of heart).

Therefore, turning to God through prayer goes along with turning to mankind. By being demanding with ourselves and generous with others, we give expression to our conversion in both a concrete and social way. We mature spiritually by converting to God, and conversion is effected through prayer, as well as through fasting and almsgiving.