

A Thought on the Season of Lent

My dear sisters and brothers, as a teenager and young man growing up in a Catholic country it was not unusual in the course of casual conversation to be asked, as the Lenten season came upon us: "What are you doing for Lent?" And the answer might be: "I'm giving up sweets, or smoking or going to the cinema or maybe even, I'm going to daily Mass." But it was usually about giving up something. And not only that, the particular practice seemed to take on a life of its own and it was a matter of sticking at what you had said you'd do or would not do until Easter, then you had the sense of achievement and the relief of being able to get back to normal living! Somewhere in the background but never explicitly stated there was a sense of suffering for Jesus, doing penance, sharing his desert experience, but the connection with Easter and sharing in the paschal mystery was at best tenuous if not a foreign country.

The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy of the second Vatican Council (par. 110) sees the season of Lent as preparing the faithful for celebrating the paschal mystery by means of a recalling of Baptism, by penance and through a more attentive listening to the Word of God and more ardent prayer. It also mentions that in Lent penance is not only internal and individual but also external and social. The paschal fast is to be kept sacred and to be observed everywhere on Good Friday and if possible prolonged throughout Holy Saturday so that "the joys of the Sunday of the resurrection may be visited on uplifted and responsive spirits."

Despite this refining of the teaching on Lent and its intimate and intrinsic relationship with Easter there is still a tendency, even in the monastery, to see Lent as a time of restriction and hardship that we have to go through rather than as a time when we prepare for the celebration of Easter. However, in looking at what the Rule of Benedict has to say on Lent it seems to me that we get there an understanding that would cheer the hearts of those who formulated the teaching of Vatican II.

Benedict's teaching on Lent is contained in chapter 49 of the Rule with more indications about reading during Lent in chapter 48. He opens his treatment of Lent with a touch of disappointed idealism and a whiff of nostalgia for a time when monks were really monks. He says that if we were truly monks we would be living a Lenten regime all the time and not only during Lent, but since we have few monks of such mettle nowadays we lesser mortals should at least live such a regime during this season. And he adds: "Therefore we urge the brethren to keep the days of Lent with a special purity of life and also at this holy season to make reparation for the failings of other times."

In concrete this means:

- That we refuse to indulge evil habits (sin)
- That we devote ourselves to prayer with tears, to reading, to compunction of heart and

- [That we devote ourselves] to self-denial (food and drink).

So during the season of Lent the community has a regime (*conversatio*) that is different than that for the rest of the year – a regime that all participate in. This regime involves, first of all, not sinning (a list of what to do and not do is found in RB 4) then nourishing one's life in the Spirit by heartfelt prayer, reading, involving special times and a special book for this season, and all of this in a spirit that expresses a real recognition of one's failings as an offense against God and a genuine desire to amend one's behaviour. Finally, it involves the body by means of abstinence from food and drink.

Beyond this community regime there is a personal call to each, to offer something spontaneously to God "in the joy of the Holy Spirit". The things suggested are "denying the body" some food, drink, sleep, needless talk and looseness in speech, and so with the joy of spiritual desire to look forward to holy Easter.

Here we find, I think, an excellent example of the principles that we find in the Constitution on the Liturgy concerning the observance of Lent:

- Listening to the word of God
- Personal prayer
- Penance (internal and individual as well as external and social)
- But most importantly we find the linking of this Lenten observance with the celebration of the Paschal mystery: looking forward with the joy of spiritual longing to the holy feast of Easter.

There is a healthy blending of the physical and the more spiritual activities so that the danger of focusing on the means rather than the end is reduced. It is all too easy for external observances such as fasting and abstinence, especially when taken on spontaneously, to become the occasion of competition, ego-boosting, or of self-concern and self-preoccupation rather than a way to self-forgetfulness for the sake of the Other and others. The memory of our Baptism is the recalling of the fact that Jesus died once and that he died for all, that he lives forever and that we share his life and are called and enabled, through his Spirit, to live as he did. Our reading or listening to the word allows this truth to become more part of ourselves and nourishes our prayer and communion with the Lord who is our true life and who assures us that all that we live as human beings is not in vain and has value when lived and done in love. Penance, internal and individual, external and social, helps us acknowledge our weaknesses, failings and sin without fear. It gives us the hope of forgiveness and healing, and enables us to live humbled and grateful for the mercy shown us. It moves us out of our comfort zone, sharpens our spiritual awareness and alerts us to our own capacity for sin as well as the call to go the extra mile. Lent lived in this way will give us the spiritual uplift and responsive heart that will make Easter a joyful and hope-filled celebration, a mystery of faith that offers true life not only to us but to the whole world.

As we progress in this Lenten season and in faith, "may we run on the path of God's commandments, our hearts overflowing with the inexpressible delight of love."

Fraternally in Christ,

f. Eamon.

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