

LENT - A call to Conversion
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Allow me to begin this reflection on Lent with a very short Midrash:

The son of a king had run away from his father. The king directly or indirectly never ceased to call back his son. However, the son being stubborn stayed far away from his father. The distance from the king's palace to the place where the child was living was a "forty day" journey.

Now this long journey was a big stumbling block that kept the child from returning to his father. Everyone tried to encourage the child to return to his father where he could have a safe living. The excuse that the child used was: "The distance is too much for me to travel ... I cannot."

One day the father sent a letter to his son telling him: "My beloved son, go as far as you are able, and I promise you that I will come the rest of the way to get you!"

Thus the Holy One, blessed be He, said to Israel: "Return unto me, and I will return unto you."
(Malachi 3.7)

The season of Lent announces this good news to us. Our God wants to meet us, wants us to return to Him, wants to give us all the necessary means to accept the invitation and gift of Conversion.

What are the necessary effective means of transportation which we are going to use in our "return" to the Father? During the journey of Lent towards the great feast of Easter we are encouraged by our mother the Church "to meditate on the Scriptures ... to pray ... to fast ... and to do good deeds, especially almsgiving".

(i) The Word of God

Psalm 32.5 (33.5) tells us that "the earth is full of the steadfast love of the Lord." The season of Lent is a preparation for the feast of Freedom and Joy, this feast is ushered in by the majestic announcement: "this is the Day that the Lord has made let us rejoice and be glad in it!"

Vatican II tells us that the Bible is a letter of love sent by God the Father to His children who are in exile. The word of God communicates to us the true freedom (John 8.30.31). The mishnah's concept of freedom can be seen in Moses' experience with the First Tablets, which were very heavy stones, but which he was able to carry with no difficulty. The sages relate that after Moses descended the mountain and saw the people worshiping the golden calf, the letters of the Ten Commandments miraculously flew from the Tablets - whereupon their weight became too great to bear and Moses dropped them. This implies that the practice of the Word of God, as represented by the letters of the commandments, freed Moses from the limitations of the law of gravity. So too, the Torah (God's Word) provides its adherents with the necessary strength to overcome life's difficulties and trials.

In Hebrews chapter 5 verses 12 to 14 we read: "For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic elements of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food; for everyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is unskilled in the word of righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, for those whose faculties have been trained by practice to distinguish good from evil." The someone mentioned in this text is none

other than the Holy Spirit.

(ii) Prayer

Israel I. Mattuck, in his book "Service of the Heart" says that true prayer is a search for God, the answer is finding Him. So prayer is a complete turning of the heart toward God. Abraham Joshua Heschel, in his book "Man's Quest for God", tells us that the focus of prayer is not the self. St. Therese of the Child Jesus says that prayer ... "is a simple look turned toward heaven" ... (read Catechism of the Catholic Church #2559, 2566, 2587, 2588). A person may spend hours of meditation about himself and yet no prayer will come to pass. Prayer consists in a complete turning of the heart toward God, toward His goodness and power. It is the momentary disregard of our personal concerns, the absence of self-centered thoughts, which constitute the art of prayer. Feeling becomes prayer at the moment in which we forget ourselves and become aware of God. When we analyze the consciousness of a supplicant, we discover that it is not concentrated upon its own interests, but on something beyond the self. The thought of personal need is absent, and the thought of divine grace alone is present in the person's mind. Thus, in beseeching God for bread, there is one instant, at least, in which our mind is directed neither to our hunger nor to food, but to His mercy. This instant is prayer.

Prayer is the means whereby we attach ourselves to God with a soulful attachment of "spirit to spirit", and in doing so our soul, as it were, flutters and soars upwards to be united with God. Our Holy Mother, St. Teresa, in speaking about prayer tells us that love of our neighbour together with detachment and humility are the essential dispositions for a genuine prayer (cfr. Way of Perfection ch 4 and ch 10 #3). St. Augustine tells us that prayer is the greatest weapon on the heart of God. It has the power to open the gates of heaven and shower graces upon us.

(iii) Fasting

St. Leo the Great, in his exhortation "As Lent Begins" says: "My dearest ones, you who want to celebrate the Passover of the Lord, should carry out these holy fasts, so that you come to the most holy of all feasts free from all turmoil. Love of humility expels the spirit of pride, source of all sins and meekness contains those whom presumption inflates." Concerning fasting Jesus said "The day will come when the bridegroom is taken away [from the wedding guests], and then they will fast." (Mt 9.15; Mk 2.20; Lk 5.35). It is a fact that fasting deepens the longing that is fulfilled by the Eucharist; the Eucharist sharpens the hunger that will be completely satisfied by the return of the Bridegroom. On that day, "He will gird himself, have them recline at table, and proceed to wait on them" (Lk 12.37).

St. Isaac the Syrian says that: "Fasting is the champion of every virtue, the beginning of the struggle, the crown of the abstinent, the beauty of virginity and sanctity, the resplendence of chastity, the commencement of the path of Christianity, the mother of prayer, the well-spring of sobriety and prudence, the teacher of stillness, and the precursor of all good works."

(iv) Good deeds especially Almsgiving

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus tells us: "Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven." (Mt 5.16). The Word of God, which is light, shines through our good deeds. The prayer of the Thursday after Ash Wednesday is of great help and perhaps we ought to repeat it quite often: "Lord, may everything we do begin with your inspiration, continue with your help, and reach perfection under your guidance."

St. Augustine tells us that if we want our prayer to reach heaven fast, we have to give it two wings: fasting and almsgiving. Nothing can bring the heart so near to God as almsgiving.

Dear sisters and brothers in Carmel, if we during this season of Lent put into action the above four tools: *Scripture, Prayer, Fasting, Almsgiving*; we can rest assured that Easter will find us ready to be liberated from the bondage of sin.

"Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,
and your wound shall quickly be healed;
Your vindication shall go before you,
the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.
Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer;
you shall cry for help, and he will say,
Here I am." (Isaiah 58.8-9a)