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Lent: Pathway to Easter

"During Lent the Church again reminds us of the need to renew our heart and our deeds so that we can rediscover the centrality of the Paschal Mystery, a returning to eternal Love." An article on Christian life.

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“Give us the right dispositions, O Lord we pray, to make these offerings, for with them we celebrate the beginning of this venerable and

sacred time.”[1] Right from the first Sunday of Lent the liturgy resolutely marks the character of the forty days that start with Ash Wednesday. Lent is a compendium of our whole life, which is a “constant returning to the house of our Father God.”[2] It is a pathway to the Paschal Mystery, to the death and resurrection of our Lord, the centre of gravity of history, and of each woman, each man: a returning to eternal Love.

During Lent the Church again reminds us of the need to renew our heart and our deeds so that we can rediscover the centrality of the Paschal Mystery. We once again have to put ourselves in God’s hands to “grow in understanding of the riches hidden in Christ and by worthy conduct pursue their effects.”[3]

“What a strange capacity man has to forget even the most wonderful things, to become used to mystery.

Let us remind ourselves this Lent that Christians cannot be superficial. While being fully involved in our everyday work . . . we have to be at the same time totally involved with God, for we are children of God.”[4] Hence during these days we want to consider in our prayer the need for conversion, to redirect our steps towards our Lord and purify our hearts, making our own the psalmist’s cry: *Cor mundum crea in me, Deus, et spiritum firmum innova in visceribus meis*; “A pure heart create for me, O God; put a steadfast spirit within me.”[5] These words are from the psalm *Miserere* that the Church offers us frequently during this liturgical season and that Saint Josemaria so often recited.

Israel’s path through the wilderness

Lent has deep roots in various key episodes in the history of salvation that is also our own history. One of

these is the crossing of the desert by the Chosen People. Those forty years for the Israelites were a time of trial and temptation. The Lord God accompanied them all the time, and made them understand that they should rely only on him, softening the hardness of their stony hearts.[6] It was a time of constant graces. Though the people suffered, it was God himself who comforted and guided them through Moses' words, and who fed them with manna and quails and gave them water at the rock of Meribah.[7]

How relevant for us are the words, filled with tenderness, with which God led the Israelites to reflect on the meaning of their long journey! *You shall remember all the way which the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, testing you to know to know what was in your hearts, whether you would keep his*

commandments or not. And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know; that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but that man lives by everything that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord.
[8]

The Lord addresses these words today to us as well, who in the desert of our lives certainly experience fatigue and problems every day, but also encounter God's fatherly care. Sometimes his care reaches us through the disinterested help of family members and friends, and sometimes even from people of good will whom we may not even know. Through his mysterious way of guiding us, God bit by bit leads us into his heart, the true promised land: *Praebe, fili mi, cor tuum mihi...* "My son, give me your heart, and let your eyes observe my ways."[9]

Many of the episodes in the exodus of the Israelites foreshadowed future events. Not all of those on that first pilgrimage through the wilderness entered the Promised Land.[10] That is why the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews, quoting Psalm 94, mourns the people's rebellion and at the same time celebrates the coming of a new exodus: *Since therefore it remained to enter it, and those who formerly received the good news failed to enter because of disobedience, again he sets a certain day, "today," saying through David so long afterward, in the words already quoted, "Today when you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts."*[11] This "today" was inaugurated by Christ. With his Incarnation, his life and glorification, our Lord leads us to the definitive exodus, in which the promises are totally fulfilled. He makes a place for us in heaven; he achieves *a Sabbath's rest for the people of God; for whosoever enters*

God's rest also ceases from his labours as God did from his.[12]

Christ's path through the wilderness

The gospel for the first Sunday in Lent shows us Jesus who, in solidarity with us, allowed himself to be tempted at the end of his forty days spent in the wilderness. His victory over Satan fills us with hope, and makes us realise that with Him we too can win out in the battles of our interior life. Our temptations then no longer upset us, but instead are turned into opportunities to get to know ourselves better and cling more closely to God. We discover that the ideal of a comfortable life is a mirage of true happiness, and we realise, with Saint Josemaria, that “we need, most probably, to change again, to be more loyal and humble, so that we become less selfish and let Christ grow in us, for *He must*

become more and more, I must become less and less (Jn 3:30)."[13]

The experience of our personal fragility should not lead to fear, but rather to a humble petition that activates our faith, hope and love: "Take away from me, Lord, whatever takes me away from you" we can say, as St Josemaria often did.[14] When we are with Jesus we find the strength to firmly reject temptation, refusing to dialogue. "Note well how Jesus responds. He does not dialogue with Satan, as Eve had done in the earthly paradise. Jesus . . . chooses to take refuge in the Word of God and responds with the power of this Word. Let us remember this: at the moment of temptation, of our temptations, there is no arguing with Satan. Our defence must always be the Word of God! And this will save us."[15]

The story of the Transfiguration, proclaimed on the second Sunday of Lent, strengthens our conviction that victory is certain in spite of our limitations. We too will share in Jesus' glory if we unite ourselves to his Cross in our daily life. Therefore we need to nourish our faith, as we see in the Gospel scenes the liturgy presents to us every three years on the last Sundays in Lent. First, we see the Samaritan woman, who overcomes sin to recognise Jesus as the Messiah who quenches, with the living water of the Holy Spirit, her thirst for love.[16] Then the man blind from birth, who recognises Christ as the light of the world who overcomes ignorance, while those who thought they could see remain blind.[17] And Lazarus, whose resurrection reminds us that Jesus has come to bring us new life.[18] By contemplating these scenes as one more person there, with the help of the saints, we will find extra

resources for our personal prayer and attain the more intense presence of God that we are seeking during these days.

Our penitential pathway as sons and daughters

The Collect for the third Sunday in Lent presents the penitential meaning of this season: “O God, author of every mercy and of all goodness, who in fasting, prayer and almsgiving have shown us a remedy for sin, look graciously on this confession of our lowliness, that we who are bowed down by our conscience may always be lifted up by your mercy.” With the humility that comes from knowing we are sinners, we ask with the whole Church for the intervention of God’s fatherly mercy: his loving gaze on our lives and his healing forgiveness.

The liturgy urges us to take up personally the process of conversion,

by inviting us to make room in our lives for the traditional penitential practices. These practices express a change in our relationship with God (prayer), with others (alms) and with ourselves (fasting).[19] It is the “spirit of penance” Saint Josemaria gave us so many practical examples of: “penance is fulfilling exactly the timetable you have fixed for yourself . . . you are practising penance when you lovingly keep to your schedule of prayer, despite feeling worn-out, listless or cold. Penance means being very charitable at all times towards those around you . . . Penance consists of putting up good-humouredly with the thousand and one little pinpricks of each day . . . in eating gladly whatever is served, without being fussy.”[20]

At the same time we know that merely external actions count for nothing without God’s grace. We

cannot be identified with Christ without his help: *quia tibi sine te placere non possumus*, "for without your help we cannot please you."[21] We try then with his help to carry out these works *in secret*, where only our Father God sees them.[22] We try to rectify our intention frequently, so as to seek more diligently his glory and the salvation of all men and women. The apostle John wrote: *he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen.*[23] These words invite us to examine our conscience carefully, because it is impossible to separate the two sides of charity. If we know that we are always under God's gaze, our sense of divine filiation will imbue our interior life and apostolate with a more trusting, childlike contrition, and with sincere self-giving to those around us, among our family, colleagues at work, friends.

Our penitential pathway through the sacraments

In our daily struggle against the disorder of sin, the sacraments of Penance and Holy Communion are also privileged moments. It makes sense that our inner penitence should be perfected by the sacrament of Confession. Much depends on the dispositions of the penitent, although the protagonist is God, who moves us to conversion. Through this sacrament – one of God’s real masterworks^[24] – we can perceive how he draws good even from our fallen freedom. This is the way Saint Josemaria explained what our role should be: “I advise you all to have, as a special devotion . . . that of making many acts of contrition. And an external, practical manifestation of this devotion is to feel a special affection for the Holy Sacrament of Penance,”^[25] in which “we clothe

ourselves with Jesus Christ and his merits.”[26]

Lent is a splendid moment to cultivate this “special affection” for Confession, by practising it ourselves in the first place, and then by telling many others about it.

After the absolution the priest gives in the name of God, the Ritual suggests a beautiful final prayer of dismissal of the penitent: “May the Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ, the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary and of all the saints, whatever good you do and suffering you endure, heal your sins, help you to grow in holiness, and reward you with eternal life. Go in peace.”[27] It is an ancient prayer in which the priest asks God to extend the effects of the sacrament over the whole of the penitent’s life, reminding us of the source of its effectiveness: the

merits of the innocent Victim and of all the saints.

As happened with the younger son in the parable, after being embraced by our Father God we are admitted to the banquet.[28] What joy it gives us to be really clean when we take part in the Eucharist! “Love our Lord very much. Maintain and foster in your soul a sense of urgency to love him better. Love God precisely now when perhaps a good many of those who hold him in their hands do not love him, but rather ill-treat him and neglect him. Be sure to take good care of our Lord for me in the Holy Mass and throughout the whole day.”[29]

Through the liturgy, the Church invites us to take up the Lenten journey eagerly. She urges us to receive the sacraments frequently, to meditate earnestly on the Word of God, to practice works of penance –

doing so with the cheerfulness that is particularly emphasised on the 4th Sunday of Lent: *Laetare Jerusalem!* [30] These practices purify our soul and prepare us to take part intensely in the Holy Week ceremonies, when we will relive the culminating moments of Jesus' time on earth. "We must bring into our life, to make them our own, the life and death of Christ. We must die through mortification and penance, so that Christ may live in us through Love. And then follow in the footsteps of Christ, with a zeal to co-redeem all mankind." [31] Well purified from our sins, and contemplating Jesus giving his life for us, we will rediscover the joy of the salvation God brings: *redde mihi laetitiam salutaris tui*, "restore unto me the joy of thy salvation." [32]

- [1] Roman Missal, 1st Sunday of Lent, Prayer over the Offerings.
- [2] Saint Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By*, 64.
- [3] Roman Missal, 1st Sunday of Lent, Collect.
- [4] *Christ is Passing By*, 65.
- [5] *Ps* 50[51]:10.
- [6] Cf. *Deut* 8:2-5.
- [7] Cf. *Ex* 15:22-17:7.
- [8] *Deut* 8:2-3.
- [9] *Prov* 23:26.
- [10] Cf. *Num* 14:20 ff.
- [11] *Heb* 4:6-7; cf. *Ps* 94[95]:7-8.
- [12] *Heb* 4:9-10.
- [13] *Christ is Passing By*, 58.

[14] Saint Josemaria, notes from a family get-together, 18 October 1972.

[15] Pope Francis, Angelus, 9 March 2014.

[16] Cf. *Jn* 4:5-42 (3rd Sunday of Lent, Year A).

[17] Cf. *Jn* 9:1-41 (4th Sunday of Lent, Year A).

[18] Cf. *Jn* 11: 1-43 (5th Sunday of Lent, Year A).

[19] Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC), 1434.

[20] Saint Josemaria, *Friends of God*, 138.

[21] Saturday, 4th week of Lent, Collect.

[22] Cf. *Mt* 6:6.

[23] *1 Jn* 4:20.

[24] Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1116.

[25] Saint Josemaría, notes taken from his preaching, 26 April 1970.

[26] Saint Josemaria, *The Way*, 310.

[27] The Rite of Penance, no. 104.

[28] Cf. *Lk* 15: 22-24.

[29] Saint Josemaria, *The Forge*, 438.

[30] 4th Sunday of Lent, Introit (cf. *Is* 66:10).

[31] Saint Josemaria, *The Way of the Cross*, 14th station.

[32] *Ps* 50[51]:14.