

Meditations: Friday after Ash Wednesday

Some reflections that can enrich our prayer as we begin the season of Lent.

- Remembering God's passage through our lives
- Fasting is a sign of an inner desire
- Jesus tells us the meaning of fasting

HEAR, O LORD, and be gracious to me (Ps 30:10). Today's Mass begins with these words of the Entrance Antiphon. The psalmist's cry to be heard expresses our need for God's assistance. *Lord, my God, I cried out*

to you for help, and you have healed me. O Lord, you brought up my soul from Sheol, restored me to life . . .

Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning (Ps 30:2-3.5). The psalmist describes a common experience: God comes to our aid when we humbly call on Him. This season of Lent can be a good opportunity to recall the many times we have experienced our Lord's assistance: *we have known and believe the love that God has for us (1 Jn 4:16).* Recalling these times when He has come to our aid will give us strength both for the present and for the future.

One of the missions of the Holy Spirit, which Jesus reveals to us, is to help us remember God's mercies, to assist our fragile memory: the Holy Spirit *will remind you of all that I have said to you (Jn 14:26).* "The Holy Spirit is like our memory. He awakens us: 'Remember this,

remember that.' He keeps us awake for the concerns of our Lord and also reminds us of our own life: 'Think of that moment, think of when you first found our Lord, think of when you left him.' It is a good way to pray: look at our Lord, and tell him: 'I am the same. I have done many things, I have made many mistakes, but I am the same person and you love me.' It is the memory of the path of our life: the Holy Spirit guides us in this memory."^[1] Two days ago, in the distribution of ashes, the priest perhaps reminded us of our origin and our end, that we come from dust and we will return to it.

Remembering the passage of God through our own life can be a good spur for conversion in this Lent that is beginning.

IN THE JEWISH TRADITION the custom of fasting was practiced as a form of penance. The prophet Isaiah, however, stresses that a merely external fast is of little use, if mercy is lacking, without an authentic desire to turn towards God. The prophet says that the fast desired by the Lord, the result of an interior conversion, is *to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke. Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?* (Is 58:6-7). True fasting leads us to love God and our neighbor more, to get out of ourselves; it is prayer of the senses that bears fruit around us. “Fasting does not bear fruit if it is not watered by mercy; it dries up without this water,” Saint Peter Chrysologus says.

“What rain is for the earth, mercy is for fasting.”^[2]

“Fasting, experienced as a form of self-denial, helps those who undertake it in simplicity of heart to rediscover God’s gift and to recognize that, created in his image and likeness, we find our fulfilment in Him.”^[3] The customs of abstinence that the Church recommends should manifest an interior attitude; the latter is actually the most important part. Saint Josemaría taught that all self-denial should be “a sign that the heart is not satisfied with created things and aspires to the Creator; that it wants to be filled with love of God so as to be able to give this same love to everyone.”^[4] The experience of hunger when we fast reminds us that God alone is our true nourishment and that everything good comes from Him. “Give us this day our daily bread,” we pray in the Our Father. External fasting should

be a sign of our internal desire to be nourished with God's love, to convert our heart to Him again.

THE DISCIPLES of John the Baptist ask Jesus why they often fast, as do the Pharisees, while his disciples do not fast. It is a good question about something that would surely attract the attention of the Jews. *The wedding guests cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast (Mt 9:15).* Our Lord takes advantage of the opportunity to show us the true meaning of fasting and penance: to unite ourselves more closely to God. So if God himself is now with them, this practice loses its relevance. His disciples should rejoice in his presence. And He adds: when He is no longer with them, then they will fast, for they will need this practice to learn to focus their hearts on God.

So often we experience our distancing from God; and this is only natural since we are on a journey towards the dwelling of our Father. Christ has come into the world to call sinners. That is why the Church reminds us of the need for fasting, for the prayer of the body that helps us to raise our sights towards heaven, which is the only important thing. Seeing our own weakness will lead us to say with the psalmist the words that Saint Josemaría prayed every night: *Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me* (Ps 51:2-4). We can ask our Lady many times each day to pray for us sinners, especially in this favorable time for conversion that the Church has prepared for us.

^[1] Pope Francis, Homily, 11 May 2020.

^[2] Saint Peter Chrysologus, Sermon 43.

^[3] Francis, Message, 11 November 2021.

^[4] Saint Josemaría, *Conversations*, no. 110.

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