

Ash Wednesday 2021 SML
MT 6:1-6, 16-18

Lent is a penitential season, a time when men once wore hair shirts, sacrificing any hope of bodily ease for forty days. G.K. Chesterton once said that St. Thomas a Becket wore a hair shirt under his purple, so that the people might benefit from his purple, and he might benefit from his penance.

Those whose lives:

- ✓ are a constant search for earthly pleasures,
- ✓ who are always on the spend for the latest and the newest,
- ✓ who have never denied themselves anything,

find it hard to understand why anyone should ever have worn a hair shirt. But in the history of universal faith, everyone knew that the hair shirt, like fasting, was a form of penance; it was what St. Paul called a “thorn in the flesh,” (2COR 12:7) a sacrifice of comfort in order to tame a man’s desire for self-indulgence.

Although it is probably impossible to buy a hairshirt in America today (I searched on Amazon and what came up under hair shirt is not what I had in mind), it does not follow

that modern man has less need for self-discipline, or that given penances as not as severe as those of medieval men.

Many people wear “hair shirts” now as ever before in history, but they are not called by that name, and they are not always assumed in the sacrificial spirit appropriate to Lent. The modern “hair shirt” is the sum of the trials, annoyances, and criticisms which surround us in the tense and nervous world of today. Hair shirts take the form of:

- ✓ getting up at 5:00 a.m. on the cold, dark mornings;
- ✓ patience to hear the so very slow and soft-spoken;
- ✓ having your email hacked yet one more time;
- ✓ how many times do I need to explain it to you?
- ✓ wearing this mask

or the most common of all:

- ✓ the daily grind of working to make ends meet especially when the ends are a mile apart.

Any of these trials is an occasion for penance, if one chooses to accept it and “offer it up” to God. I don’t know about you, but growing up, “offer it up” was the be all and end all answer to any penance.

- ✓ Mom, my shoulder hurts. Offer it up. That’s all you got.

- ✓ I have a lot of homework. Offer it up.
- ✓ My bike tire has a flat. Offer it up.

My Father was a convert after he married my Mother. When they were dating, if he complained about something, anything, my Mother would say, "Offer it up." Not knowing what that meant, he asked, and she explained it means offering up the hardship, the complaint, the whatever, in union with Christ's sufferings on the Cross, for an intention, and if you didn't have one, "for the poor souls in purgatory" was a ready stand by intention. My Dad asked my Mother, "Why is it you Catholics need to get credit for everything?" I'll answer my Dad's question in just a bit.

As I just said, any trial is an occasion for penance, if one chooses to accept it and "offer it up" to God. A hair shirt of this sort is not one we put on ourselves. It is our neighbor who puts it on us. And he usually puts it on to stay.

Old hair shirts can be taken off, if the suffering became too great.

New hair shirts stick to us like glue.

Old hair shirts were made to measure.

New hair shirts take our measure.

Old hair shirts were to be taken off on Holy Saturday.
New hair shirts are worn year round.

The tragedy is that most modern wearers of a hair shirt get no spiritual benefit out of it. Their trials and frustrations irritate and annoy them, making them complain, making them “difficult.” But because they do not use their trials properly, they have the pain but miss the merit.

Pain and sacrifice are vastly different things. The difference lies in the will, and not in the degree of suffering. Pain is sacrifice without the love of God.

Sacrifice is pain combined with love of God.

There is a big difference between the woman who diets and the woman who fasts, although both may lose fifteen pounds. As one does it for the sake of her body, the other does it for the sake of her soul. There is no difference in the “hair shirts” they wear. The reason for wearing the hair shirt makes all the difference.

To gain merit from our inescapable hair shirts, two basic beliefs are needed. One must first acknowledge man is both body and soul, and that it takes real effort to keep the body the servant of the soul. The second essential belief is a belief in

the Redemption which shows us how, by penance, we may make up for our own past failings, and even for the faults of others.

In earlier days, when life was less difficult and there was less egotism and more charity abroad, the literal hair shirt had its place. But nowadays, hair shirts are everywhere we turn. Perhaps if we examined our conscience, we should discover that we ourselves were the worst hair shirt our family or our neighbor had to wear. Because the good Lord knew this, He told our family and our neighbors how to wear us patiently, when He said to them, "Take up your cross." Or as my Mother would say, "Offer it up."