LENT

This issue of Orantes contains practical resources for Lent, the forty days set aside to prepare us for celebration of the Paschal Mystery. These resources are designed to be used a Bulletin Inserts by which your parishioners might prepare for Easter by prayer, penance and almsgiving, just as the catechumens prepare by the various stages of Christian Initiation. (Cf. Universal Norms on the Liturgical Year and Calendar, no. 27.)

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Lenten Fasting

I like control. I like to be the smartest and best informed man in the room. I like to be the one in charge. I like to have the power to work my will. In other words, I, like Adam and Eve, like to make believe that I am God.

Lent and its fasting, the Stations of the Cross, and almsgiving and prayer are nothing less than an antidote to my obsession with control. It is a time, as a very wise prelate once said, to imagine what it would be like if I were not God!

Very often in life the things we let go of are not freely relinquished. But Lent is a time when out of love and the desire to be made perfect in Christ we imitate his act of self emptying, opening our arms on the cross of Lenten penance, admitting, once again, that there is a time for holding on and a time for letting go.

“…through bodily fasting you restrain our faults, raise up our minds, and bestow both virtue and its rewards, through Christ our Lord.”¹

“…you will that our self-denial should give you thanks, humble our sinful pride, contribute to the feeding of the poor, and so help us imitate you in your kindness.”²

“…in fasting, prayer and almsgiving [you] have shown us a remedy for sin, look [now] on this confession of our lowliness, that we, who are bowed down by our conscience, may always be lifted up by your mercy.”³

¹ Preface IV of Lent.
² Preface III of Lent.
³ Collect, Third Sunday of Lent.
Fasting from Food

I started to fast last Lent...I had oatmeal for breakfast, which really made my doctor happy. I had soup for lunch and a very small piece of fish with some potatoes for supper. It’s not easy, but I need to fast. Oh, not for the obvious reasons, the ones that are scrupulously marked down on my doctor’s Ipad each time I go to see him, but I need to fast from food for a more important reason.

You see, every time I eat I’m convinced that the food is mine...I’ve earned it, I have a right to it. After all I’ve done, the least God can do is to give me a good meal...It’s my food...I’ve got a right to it. It’s a matter of simple justice.

And when I open my wallet and give some of my money away to the poor, I am being so generous, I am such a good person. So kind, so self-sacrificing. Every night before he goes to bed, God must say prayers of thankfulness for having had such a good son. It’s my food, my money: it’s all mine!

So what I really need to do is fast. Because fasting teaches me that it’s not all about me. When fasting, it hits me between the eyes (or maybe between the eyes and stomach) that neither the food, nor the money, nor the power, nor my good health, nor anything else I can see or taste or feel belongs to me. It’s all his. And by letting go of it, and placing it in his hands (even for a little while), and by waiting to hear what he wants me to do with it, I am doing his will. It a matter of simple justice.

You think, when you give the poor man a piece of bread, Saint Leo the Great once wrote, that you are generously sharing with him something that is yours. But you are a fool, he says, for all of creation has been given to us by God, nothing belongs to you! You are just giving to the poor man the piece of bread which God had created for him.

“Fasting...[is] turning away from the temptation to “devour” everything to satisfy our voracity and being ready to suffer for love, which can fill the emptiness of our hearts. Prayer... teaches us to abandon idolatry and the self-sufficiency of our ego, and to acknowledge our need of the Lord and his mercy. [By] almsgiving, whereby we escape from the insanity of hoarding everything for ourselves in the illusory belief that we can secure a future that does not belong to us.”

4 Pope Francis, Lenten Message for 2019.
Fasting from Noise

The hardest fasting in our day and age may not be from food, but from noise. The fasting we find in silence when I fast from the noise of my own voice (I need to shut up for long stretches of time) and from the constant cacophony, the bilious barrage of static with which I fill my soul from morning to night. But try it sometime. Unplug the ear buds, turn down the TV, stop singing that song out loud and sit down and shut up. And listen to the silence.

Saint Pope John Paul II spoke frequently about silence. Maybe he learned it as an eight year old boy when his mother died and he sat quietly in the corner of the room as she was waked in the front parlor. Maybe he learned it twelve years later when his father died and left him alone to face the world as he knelt in the Church after everyone else left and first began to hear God whispering the idea of Priesthood to him. Maybe he learned it that Black Sunday when he hid from the Nazi troops all day in the crawl space under his Uncle’s house.

Imagine this twenty-something, still recovering from two weeks in the hospital after being hit by a German truck, hearing the sound of the jack boots as they searched for Polish collaborators. Maybe it was that silence that taught him the power of no words spoken at all.

In any case, Blessed John Paul looked on the noisiness of our era as an invitation to carve out moments of quiet. He summed up his view in this way. He once wrote:

“The frenetic activity of modern life with all its pressures makes it indispensable that Christians seek prayerful silence and contemplation as both conditions for and expressions of a vibrant faith. When God is no longer at the center of human life, then life itself becomes empty and meaningless… Jesus himself often “went off to a lonely place and prayed there…” Jesus’ prayer is our example, especially when we are caught up in the tensions and responsibilities of daily life.”

There is no word as powerful as silence. Silence cannot be done in haste. Only silence can enable us to embrace with our hearts that which is being prayed, sung, or said. Silence must come before action and the only reaction worthy to follow a meeting with God, is kneeling in silence, humility, and joy.

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5 John Paul II, Ecclesia in Oceania, no. 37.
Fasting from Control: 
Going to Confession

All of this fasting from what feeds the body, the heart and the ego is but a poor imitation of the perfect self-emptying love of Christ upon the Cross. Which means that the hardest fasting of all is the fasting from control which awaits me in the Sacrament of Penance.

The ultimate admission that I am not in control is to go to Confession and rely entirely on God’s mercy. Confession is the admission that it is not my actions which redeem me, but Christ’s perfect Sacrifice, offered on the wood of the Cross for my salvation. It is not my will that I should seek, but Christ’s will for my life.

So how do we fast from control in the Sacrament of Penance?

First, quite simply, by going to confession, by opening our hearts to God’s healing grace and getting our lives back on track in a hundred little ways. Perhaps the mother needs to confess the ways in which she has lost patience and maybe the father needs to confess the ways in which he has been cruel while the priest needs to confess his lack of charity or hope or zeal.

Each of us need to examine our consciences in this penitential season, possibly by clicking one of these links with examinations of conscience for children, young adults, single people, those who are married and Priests. Then we can reflect on our sinfulness, prepare to let go of everything that weighs us down and receive Christ’s mercy in the Sacrament of Penance.

Ultimately, each of these examinations of conscience lead me back to the same old question: have I sought God’s way or tried to maneuver my own way in fulfillment of my own
selfish desires. It is the question Eve and Adam might have asked as they sought to make themselves God’s competitors and not his children. It is the question we should ask each time we are tempted by selfishness and sin.

So, will you go to confession this Lent? Will you open your heart and confess all the darkness you have hidden away in those little secret corners?

And Father, how often will you sit in the confessional? Will you wait with patience, like the father of the Prodigal, ready to rejoice when those who were lost have finally been found?

What will we do this Lent? Will be fast from control or just make believe we are too busy about so many things?

“Sacramental confession is the way of sanctification for both the penitent and the confessor….Let [priests] always remember…before going to the confessional, to be first forgiven sinners and, only later, ministers of forgiveness. Humbly, like all sinners, we kneel before the confessor and implore for ourselves the Divine Mercy.”

Pope Francis (March, 2019)
The great philosopher Rudolf Otto speaks of God as the *mysterium trimendum*: the unimaginable mystery, so much greater than even our imaginations can grasp. And all you can do when you encounter the *mysterium trimendum*, Otto tells us, is to shut up and bow down. Silence is the ultimate affirmation of God’s will. No more words, no more rationalizations, no more trying to figure it out, but like the little kid, we let our Father lead us by the hand where he wants us to go.

Silence embraces what Virginia Wolfe used to call “moments of being,” moments in which we are more profoundly aware of our being alive and real than at any other time of our lives. Such moments can only take place in silence.

Think of the first time a mother takes her child in her arms. No words, just silence and profound bonding and love. Think of the last time you hold the hand of a loved one before he dies. No words, just silence and love. Think of the moment of desperation as you stare at the cross, or the moment of deep joy as your heart overflows. No words, just silence and being and the peace the world cannot give.

It is, perhaps, when we are silent that we are most alive. Which is why the culture of death thrives on words. Words which seek to manipulate and pervert. Remember the first weapon which the serpentine Satan used in the garden to lead our first parents to perdition? It was words. ‘Did God really tell you not to eat from any tree in the garden? You won’t die! Eat that fruit and you’ll be like God!’ Lies. Lies which are the first strike of Satan at the human heart. But Satan does not use silence. Silence is the carving tool of God, when we bow before him in silence and adoration.

“Grant, almighty God, through the yearly observances of holy Lent, that we may grow in understanding of the riches hidden in Christ and by worthy conduct pursue their effects. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.”

Collect for the First Sunday in Lent
Some Final Thoughts…

Liturgists, like pastors, face temptations, as exemplified by the famous joke about liturgists and terrorists (every joke has a morsel of truth at its core).

Which is why Lent is as good for liturgists and pastors as it is for all the baptized. For we humans are so often tempted by the nagging conviction which resides just behind the heart and slightly above the stomach, that gut-wrenching suspicion that true happiness lies not in doing what I should do, but in what I want to do. It is the lie that happiness will be found not in obedient surrender, but in selfish grasping.

It is the agony of the three year old at the cookie jar, or the fifth grader sitting beside the smart kid with the answers, or the teen overwhelmed by lust, or his father doing his taxes or the spouse with just the right words to strike back or the old man whose just fed up or the addict with a bottle or the couple who just learned they are inconveniently pregnant. They are in agony, just like the liturgist, or the pastor.

Lent is the perfect season for a good examination of conscience as to whether we do what we do because we want to give of ourselves or build up our ego and grab for all the gusto we can get. It’s the temptation as old as Paradise, when our first parents heard the whisper of the snake in the tree that they could be like God if they would just do what they knew to be wrong.

For the whole purpose of our worship of Christ upon the Cross is not to know the rubrics (although that’s important), preach with theological integrity (ditto) or impress with the newest set of vestments. The whole purpose of worship is to join the sacrifices of our lives with the perfect sacrifice of praise offered on the altar of the Cross, “for our good and the good of all his Holy Church.”

So I wish you a good Lent, with much fasting, almsgiving and prayer, that we might turn from everything which keeps us from doing his will in praise of his Holy Name.

In the Lord,

Monsignor James P. Moroney
Director

Lenten Guidelines and Regulations (Diocese of Worcester, 2020)
Way of the Cross (Pope Francis, 2019)