

VIGILS READINGS
THIRD WEEK OF LENT
March 4-10, 2018

Sunday, March 4:

A Commentary on the Gospel of Mark by St. Augustine ¹

God's temple is holy, and you are that temple: all you who believe in Christ and whose belief makes you love him. Real belief in Christ means love of Christ: it is not the belief of the demons who believed without loving and therefore despite their belief said: *What do you want with us, Son of God?* No; let our belief be full of love for him we believe in, so that instead of saying: *What do you want with us,* we may rather say: *We belong to you, you have redeemed us.* All who believe in this way are like living stones which go to build God's temple, and like the rot-proof timber used in the framework of the ark which the flood waters could not submerge. It is in this temple, that is, in ourselves, that prayer is addressed to God and heard by him.

But to pray in God's temple we must pray in the pace of the Church, in unity with the body of Christ, which is made up of many believers throughout the world. When we pray in this temple our prayers are heard, because whoever prays in the peace of the Church prays in spirit and in truth.

Our Lord's driving out of the temple people who were seeking their own ends, who came to the temple to buy and sell, is symbolic. For if that temple was a symbol it obviously follows that the body of Christ, the true temple of which the other was an image, has within it some who are buyers and sellers, or in other words, people who are seeking their own interests and not those of Christ.

But the temple was not destroyed by the people who wanted to turn the house of God into a den of thieves, and neither will those who live evil lives in the Catholic Church and do all they can to convert God's house into a robber's den succeed in destroying the temple. The time will come when they will be driven out by a whip made of their own sins.

The temple of God, this body of Christ, this assembly of believers, has but one voice, and sings the psalms as though it were one person. If we wish, it is our voice; if we wish, we may listen to the singer with our ears and ourselves sing in our hearts. But if we choose not to do so it will mean that we are like buyers and sellers, preoccupied with our own interests.

¹Journey with the Fathers – Year B – New City Press – NY -1993 – pg 34

Monday, March 5, 2018

From a sermon by St. Peter Chrysologus on prayer and fasting ¹

There are three things, my brethren, by which faith stands firm, devotion remains constant, and virtue endures. They are prayer, fasting and mercy. Prayer knocks at the door, fasting obtains, mercy receives. Prayer, mercy and fasting: these three are one, and they give life to each other.

Fasting is the soul of prayer; mercy is the lifeblood of fasting. Let no one try to separate them; they cannot be separated. If you have only one of them or not all together, you have nothing. So if you pray, fast; if you fast, show mercy; if you want your petition to be heard, hear the petition of others. If you do not close your ear to others you open God's ear to yourself.

When you fast, see the fasting of others. If you want God to know that you are hungry, know that another is hungry. If you hope for mercy, show mercy. If you look for kindness, show kindness. If you want to receive, give. If you ask for yourself what you deny to others, your asking is mockery.

Let this be the pattern for all peoples when they practice mercy: show mercy to others in the same way, with the same generosity, with the same promptness, as you want others to show mercy to you.

Therefore let prayer, mercy and fasting be one single plea to God on our behalf, one speech in our defense, and a threefold-united prayer in our favor.

Let us use fasting to make up for what we have lost by despising others. Let us offer our souls in sacrifice by means of fasting. There is nothing more pleasing that we can offer, as the Psalmist said in prophecy: AA sacrifice to God is a broken spirit; God does not despise a bruised and humbled heart@.

Offer your soul to God; make him an oblation of your fasting, so that your soul may be a pure offering, a holy sacrifice, a living victim, remaining your own and at the same time made over to God. Whoever fails to give this to God will not be excused, for if you are to give him yourself you are never without the means of giving.

To make these acceptable, mercy must be added. Fasting bears no fruit unless it is watered by mercy. Fasting dries up when mercy dries up. Mercy is to fasting as rain is to the earth. However much you may cultivate your heart, clear the soil of your nature, root out vices, sow virtues, if you do not release the springs of mercy, your fasting will bear no fruit.

¹ The Liturgy of the Hours - vol. II - pg. 231 - Catholic Book Publishing Co - 1976

When you fast, if your mercy is thin your harvest will be thin; when you fast, what you pour out in mercy overflows into your barn. Therefore do not lose by saving, but gather in by scattering. Give to the poor, and you give to yourself. You will not be allowed to keep what you have refused to give to others.

Tuesday, March 6, 2018:

From a letter of St Maximus the Confessor ²

God=s will is to save us, and nothing pleases him more than our coming back to him with true repentance. The heralds of truth and the ministers of divine grace have told us this from the beginning, repeating it in every age. Indeed, God=s desire for our salvation is the primary and preeminent sign of his infinite goodness. It is precisely in order to show that there is nothing closer to God=s heart than the divine Word of the Father, with untold condescension, lived among us in the flesh, and did, suffered and said all that was necessary to reconcile us to God the Father, when we were at enmity with him, and to restore us to the life of blessedness from which we had been exiled. He healed our physical infirmities by miracles; he freed us from our sins, many and grievous as they were, by suffering and dying, taking them upon himself as if he were answerable for them, sinless though he was. He also taught us in many different ways that we should wish to imitate him by our own kindness and genuine love for one another.

So it was that Christ proclaimed that he had come to call sinners to repentance, not the righteous, and that it was not the healthy who required a doctor, but the sick. He declared that he had come to look for the sheep that was lost, and that it was to the lost sheep of the house of Israel that he had been sent.

To give the same lesson he revived the man who, having fallen into the hands of brigands, had been left stripped and half-dead from his wounds; he poured wine and oil on the wounds, bandaged them, placed the man on his own mule, and brought him to an inn, where he left sufficient money to have him cared for, and promised to repay any further expense on his return.

Again, he told of how that Father. Who is goodness itself, was moved with pity for his profligate son who returned and made amends by repentance; how he embraced him, dressed him once more in the fine garments that befitted his own dignity, and did not reproach him for any of his sins.

So too, when he found wandering in the mountains and hills the one sheep that had strayed from God=s flock of a hundred, he brought it back to the fold, but he did not exhaust it

² The Liturgy of the Hours - vol II - pg 304 - Catholic Book Publishing co - 1976

by driving it ahead of him. Instead, he placed it on his own shoulders and so, compassionately, he restored it safely to the flock.

So also he cried out: "Come to me, all you that toil and are heavy of heart. Accept my yoke," he said, by which he meant his commands, or rather the whole way of life that he taught us in the Gospel. He then speaks of a burden, but that is only because repentance seems difficult. In fact, however, "My yoke is easy," he assures us, "and my burden is light."

Then again he instructs us in divine justice and goodness, telling us to be like our heavenly Father, holy, perfect and merciful. "Forgive," he says, "and you will be forgiven. Behave toward other people as you would wish them to behave toward you."

Wednesday, March 7, 2018:

A Lenten Homily by Pope Benedict XVI 3

We recently entered Lent with fasting and the Rite of Ashes. But what does "entering Lent" mean? It means we enter a season of special commitment in the spiritual battle to oppose the evil present in the world, in each one of us and around us. It means looking evil in the face and being ready to fight its effects and especially its causes, even its primary cause which is Satan,

It means not off-loading the problem of evil on to others, on to society or on to God, but rather recognizing one's own responsibility and assuming it with awareness. In this regard Jesus' invitation to each one of us Christians to take up our "cross" and follow him with humility and trust (Mt 16:24) is particularly pressing.

Although the "cross" may be heavy it is not synonymous with misfortune, with disgrace, to be avoided on all accounts; rather it is an opportunity to follow Jesus and thereby to acquire strength in the fight against sin and evil. Thus entering Lent means renewing the personal and community decision to face evil together with Christ.

The way of the Cross is in fact the only way that leads to the victory of love over hatred, of sharing over selfishness, of peace over violence. Seen in this light, Lent is truly an opportunity for a strong ascetic and spiritual commitment based on Christ's grace.

Thursday, March 8, 2018:

From a Lenten Homily by Pope Benedict XVI 4

3 L'Osservatore Romano – February 13, 2008 - pg 1

4 L'Osservatore Romano – February 13, 2008 – pg 7

Lent renews in us the hope in the God who made us pass from death to life. Lent, fully oriented to the mystery of Redemption, is defined the “path of true conversion”. I would like to reflect on prayer and suffering as qualifying aspects of the liturgical season of Lent. In the encyclical *Spe Salvi*, I identified prayer and suffering, together with action and judgment, as “settings for learning and practicing hope. We can thus affirm that precisely because the Lenten season is an invitation to prayer, penance and fasting, it affords a providential opportunity to enliven and strengthen our hope.

Prayer nourishes hope because nothing expresses the reality of our God in our life better than praying with faith. Even in the loneliness of the most severe trial, nothing and no one can prevent me from addressing the Father “in the secret” of my heart, where He alone sees, as Jesus says in the gospel.

Two moments of Jesus’ earthly existence come to mind. One is at the beginning and the other almost at the end of his public ministry: the 40 days in the desert, on which the Season of Lent is based, and the agony in Gethsemane.

Prayer alone with the Father face to face in the desert; prayer filled with “mortal anguish” in the Garden of Olives. Yet in both these circumstances it is by praying that Jesus unmasks the wiles of the tempter and defeats him. Thus, prayer proves to be the first and principal “weapon” with which to win the victory in our struggle against the spirit of evil.

Christ’s prayer reaches its culmination on the Cross. It is expressed in those last words which the Evangelists have recorded. Where he seems to utter a cry of despair: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Christ was actually making his own the invocation of someone beset by enemies with no escape, who has no other than God to turn to and, over and above any human possibilities, experiences his grace and salvation.

With these words of the Psalm, first of a man who is suffering, then of the People of God in their suffering, caused by God’s apparent absence, Jesus made his own this cry of humanity that suffers from God’s apparent absence, and carried this cry to the Father’s heart. So, by praying in this ultimate solitude together with the whole of humanity, he opens the heart of God to us.

There is no contradiction between the words in Psalm 21 and the words full of filial trust: “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit”. These words, also taken from Psalm 30, are the dramatic imploration of a person who, abandoned by all, is sure he can entrust himself to God.

The prayer of supplication full of hope is consequently the *leitmotif* of Lent and enables us to experience God as the only anchor of salvation. Indeed when it is collective, the prayer of the People of God is a voice of one heart and soul, it is a “heart to heart” dialogue, like Queen Esther’s moving plea when her people were about to be exterminated: “O my Lord, you only are our King; help me, who am alone and have no helper but you.” ... “for a great danger

overshadows me". In the face of a "great danger" greater hope is needed: only the hope that can count on God. (*over*)

Prayer is a crucible in which our expectations and aspirations are exposed in the light of God's Word, immersed in dialogue with the One who is Truth, and from which they emerge free from hidden lies and compromises with various forms of selfishness. Without the dimension of prayer, the human "I" ends by withdrawing into himself, and the conscience, which should be an echo of God's voice, risks being reduced to a mirror of the self, so that the inner conversation becomes a monologue, giving rise to self-justifications by the thousands. Therefore, prayer is a guarantee of openness to others: whoever frees himself for God and his needs simultaneously opens himself to the other, to the brother or sister who knocks at the door of his heart and asks to be heard, asks for attention, forgiveness, at times correction, but always in fraternal charity.

Thus prayer is never self-centered, it is always centered on the other. As such, it opens the person praying to the "ecstasy" of charity, to the capacity to go out of oneself to draw close to the other in humble, neighborly service. True prayer is the driving force of the world, since it keeps it open to God. For this reason without prayer there is no hope but only illusion.

Friday, March 9, 2018:

A Continuation of the Homily by Pope Benedict XVI 5

It is not God's presence that alienates man, but His absence: without the true God, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Illusory hopes become an invitation to escape from reality. Speaking with God, dwelling in His presence, letting oneself be illuminated and purified by His Word introduces us, instead, into the heart of reality, into the very motor of becoming cosmic; it introduces us, so to speak, to the beating heart of the universe.

In a harmonious connection with prayer, fasting and almsgiving can also be considered occasions for learning and practicing Christian hope. The Father and ancient writers liked to emphasize that these three dimensions of Gospel life are inseparable, reciprocally enrich each other and bear more fruit the more they collaborate with each other. Lent as a whole, thanks to the joint action of prayer, fasting and almsgiving, forms Christians to be men and women of hope after the example of the Saints.

In the encyclical *Spe Salvi* I wrote: “The true measure of humanity is essentially determined in relationship to suffering and the sufferer. This holds true both for the individual and for society. Easter, to which Lent is oriented, is the mystery which gives meaning to human suffering, based on the superabundant com-passion of God, brought about in Jesus Christ. The Lenten journey therefore, since it is wholly steeped in the Easter light, makes us relive what happened in Christ’s divine and human heart while he was going up to Jerusalem for the last time to offer himself in expiation.

Suffering and death fell like darkness as he gradually came nearer to the Cross, but the flame of love shone brighter. Indeed Christ’s suffering was penetrated by the light of love. It was the Father’s love that permitted the son to confidently face his last “baptism”, which he himself defines as the apex of his mission.

Jesus received that baptism of sorrow and love for us, for all of humanity. He has suffered for truth and justice, bringing the+ gospel of suffering to human history, which is the other aspect of the Gospel of love. God cannot suffer, but He can and wants to be com-passionate. Through Christ’s passion he can bring his *con-solatio* to every human suffering, “the consolation of God’s compassionate love – and so the star of hope rises.”

As for prayer, so for suffering: the history of the Church is very rich in witnesses who spent themselves for others without reserve, at the cost of harsh suffering. The greater the hope that enlivens us, the greater is the ability within us to suffer for the love of truth and good, joyfully offering up the minor and major daily hardships and inserting them into Christ’s great com-passion.

Saturday, March 10, 2018:

A Sermon of St. Maximus 6

We must accept with all reverence, brethren, the sacred days of Lent, and not repine because of the length of the season; for the longer the days of our fasting, the greater the grounds of our forgiveness; the longer the time of our self-denial, the greater the price paid for our soul’s salvation; the severer the treatment of our wounds, the more sure the healing of our offenses. For God who is the Physician of our souls has initiated an appropriate time; sufficient for the just to make reparation, and for sinners to ask for mercy; the one praying for peace, the other imploring pardon.

For the days of Lent are suited to our purpose; not short, so that we may plead in prayer; not long, for our need to gain merit. For in this fast of forty days any offense may be wiped out, and the severity of any judge softened. The time may be long and tedious for the

one who neither pleads for his sins, nor hopes for forgiveness. For he who despairs will neither confess his sin, nor hope in the mercy of the Judge.

Holy and salutary therefore is the time of Lent, in which the Judge is moved to mercy, the sinner to repentance, and the just to peace. For in these days the Divinity is inclined to be more merciful, the sinner to repent, and grace to be earned. All things are now prepared: the heavens to pardon, the sinner to confess, the tongue to plead.

Mystical and salutary is this number, forty. For when in the beginning the iniquity of man covered the face of the earth, God, dissolving the clouds of heaven for the space of this number of days, covered the whole earth with a flood. You see then already that in this time the Mystery is put before us in Figure. For as it then rained for forty days, to cleanse the world, so now does it also. Yet the deluge of these days must be called mercy, in that through it iniquity was crushed, and justness upheld. For it took place out of mercy, to deliver the just and so that the wicked might no longer sin. We see clearly it was through mercy it came, as a sort of baptism, in which the face of the earth was renewed, that is, so that man who wallowed in sin might come to grace in the dwelling of Noah, and so that he who was then an abode of iniquity, might become a dwelling place of holiness.

The Flood of those days was, as I say, a Figure of Baptism. For that was then prefigured which is now fulfilled; that is, just as when the fountains of water overflowed, iniquity was imperiled, and justness alone reigned; sin was swept into the abyss, and holiness upraised to heaven. Then, as I said, that was prefigured which is now fulfilled in Christ's Church. For as Noah was saved in the Ark, while the iniquity of men was drowned in the Flood, so by the waters of Baptism the Church is borne close to heaven, and the faith reigns on earth which came forth from the Ark of the Savior.

End of Third Week of Lent