

**THE THIRD WEEK OF LENT**  
**&**  
**THE ANNUNCIATION OF THE LORD**

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Sunday

## **WE ARE CALLED TO TURN TO GOD**

### **A reflection from a talk by St. Pope Paul VI**

We can't ignore the dominant thought that resounds everywhere in the Church during the Lenten season. We are preparing for Easter and so we must turn to the Lord with all our heart. What a contrast with the ways of thinking common to our culture, and with the mentality that culture has shaped in us. Can a Christian evade the "law of penance"? Christ has used strong words about this: "*Unless you repent you will perish!*" 'Repent' means, in Hebrew, "turn toward the Lord" and in Greek "change your way of thinking". These words explain the duty of penance which comes from what is intrinsic and necessary to being a person who is fallen and yet has responded to the call of Christ. We need atonement, expiation, even moral supervision—and all of them are part of penance.

Fix your attention on the interior aspect of penance. Doing penance is possible for everyone and is an obligation for all of us. Take the Greek term, '*metanoia*'. It means conversion, repentance, inner change. That means a change of outlook. What is most important is a change in one's thoughts, ideas, ways of judging, and ways of making decisions of conscience. Doing this is penance pure and simple; stop looking to what is false and look to what is true!

This reordering of our mentality and our morality is pressing during Lent. We have to ask ourselves, with courage and sincerity, what needs to be corrected in our inner life, and even in our secret personal life. Pascal vividly makes the point, "*All our dignity consists in thought. Let's take care, then, to think rightly. That is the principle of morality.*" To "think rightly"! We must begin here and it is not easy. Not only because it takes so much mental effort—and can be tiring and dramatic even for professional thinkers like philosophers and truth seekers. Yet everyone is called to do it.

Changing one's mentality means recognizing what is erroneous and this alone calls for great humility as well as courage. To say to oneself: "I have been wrong" is something that requires strength of character. What if one has to renounce fixed ideas that have partly defined one's personality? Are we free to think whatever we want and use whatever ideology we choose? To admit you aren't free in this way calls for a spiritual revolution. You have to sacrifice what is most personal in you—your own convictions about what is true! Moving toward righteousness, virtue, a spirit of faith is, then, very difficult.

It is also a wonderful and even meritorious thing to do. It founds an over-whelming effort at renewal. To forgive offenses, to overcome capricious dislikes, to refuse to pursue a point of honor, or to renounce opportunities to use violence are ways of truly turning to the Lord. These are the fruits of Christian love.

We live in times that are revolutionary. Change, tearing down, renewing—these have been the watchwords of our times. It all depends on how things are changed. St. Paul says, "*Be renewed in the spirit of our minds!*" Be renewed by thinking and loving as Jesus has loved us. That is the change we and our world and culture and times need. We begin with ourselves and we begin today.

*Monday*

## **TO WHOM DO YOU LOOK?**

**A reflection developed from a text by Fr. Carroll Stuhlmüller**

Anciently, any sort of incurable skin disease symbolized that death was triumphing in the person affected, and thus made that person unfit to come close to the God of Life, the One Lord of Israel. Such a one was cut off from community with those who belong to the One Living God. Standing at a significant distance, then ten such people called out to Jesus. One of them was a Samaritan—probably despised even by the others, who were Jews. The Samaritan was pushed away from God in two ways, and yet he hoped in God and recognized God's presence in Jesus as much as any of his fellow lepers.

To whom do you turn when you feel or really are isolated, even rejected? We all felt that sometime during our growing up years. Did it occur to us to turn to God? Did it occur to us that God might not have rejected us or pushed us away just because our peers had? Hope and acceptance are ordinarily inseparable, at least in a young person's mind. Now put that together with the fact that Jesus accepted these ten and healed them of the physical side of their isolation. But nine didn't even think of thanking him—only the one who knew rejection from almost every side saw the real need to draw near to the one who had reached out with love and healing. That's what gratitude is about.

The very successful General Naaman, head of the Syrian army, had no one to whom he could turn to heal his leprosy. A little girl, enslaved by Naaman, told him to turn to Elisha, the prophet of a God he had never worshipped or acknowledged. When he asked for healing the One God healed him, even in his unbelief. To have God's help you just have to turn from human resources and ask. God gives freely, as Elisha showed by refusing all payment. Secretly Elisha's servant went and asked payment; he got money but also Naaman's leprosy.

What does God ask? Only that our gratitude cause us to point to the Lord as everyone's hope for healing and life. To whom does God send us, to those who are outcast and marginalized and have no one to turn to. How does one recognize such people? By their being shut in upon themselves, not knowing how to reach out for help or to whom they should turn. What God wants now is to give us a reason to be grateful so we can show others where healing and new life are found. So we begin by turning to God, once we realize that the life we seek isn't to be found anywhere else. Then we need only share the story of how God healed us and gave us new hope and joy. That is our vocation and there are millions of ways to live it out. Grateful love is the beginning of all vocations and their heart.

Tuesday

## **A Meditation: The Penance of Forgiving** **By Fr. Benedict Groeschel, CFR**

Perhaps the greatest penance of all is forgiveness. It depends on what it is we have to forgive. We have already spoken of the grace to be able to forgive, and have said that forgiveness is a process. First we must decide to forgive and review the reasons for forgiving, beginning with the undeniable fact that God has forgiven us.

In the Gospel, Christ teaches us the necessity of continuing forgiveness. *“Peter came up and said to Jesus: Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? As many as seven times? Jesus said, I do not say to you seven times but seventy times seven”* (Mt.18:21f). Peter’s use of the word “brother” refers to people we know well and who may often offend us. A great deal of personal unhappiness comes from constant friction with loved ones. We feel others have taken advantage of us or been ungrateful or hypercritical.

As you make this meditation, think of a couple of people who are permanent sources of pain or annoyance in your life. Don’t be surprised if they are also people you love—such as a fellow struggler on the way to Christ. Don’t be surprised if some things they do are wrong or inconsiderate or even cruel.

But ask yourself why. Every human action has a cause. The cause may be confusion or a complete distortion or a relapse into childish-ness. That’ life, we say! If Jesus was mistreated by his fellows, if he was betrayed by an apostle and killed by the very people he came to save, don’t be surprised if you get hurt by someone you love.

It’s wise to pray for guidance, to think over carefully what you are adding to the conflict of what you did to create it in the past, or even how you can help the other person change a defensive position toward you. In the worst of circumstances the hurtful person may be twisted or very ill, or just unable to be peaceful and livable.

Think this over and you will say to yourself: “I just have to carry this cross, but I will try to carry it with a smile.” You will live longer, and when you get to the other side, you will be able to look into the eyes of Jesus and say, “I tried”. And perhaps he will say to you. “I know you did”.

Lord Jesus, give me your Holy Spirit and his gifts of wisdom, counsel and courage, that I may forgive with courage, understand with wisdom and heal with counsel, because you have forgiven me more than seventy times seven. Amen.

*Wednesday*

## **BECOMING ONE WITH THE LORD**

### **A reflection from a sermon by St. Pope Leo the Great**

True reverence for the Lord and for his passion involves fixing the eyes of one's heart on Jesus crucified. How do we do that? We begin by recognizing Jesus in our own humanity. Where do we see and experience this? We look to our neighbor. Do you feel "entombed" in your mortality and trying to get rid of the sufferings or anxieties that it brings you? Throw off this weight and come forth from the dead! Throw off all self-concern and share only Jesus and God's concerns.

However weak you may be, you will never be denied a share in the victory of the cross, nor will you ever be beyond the help of the prayer of Christ. Even those who tormented Christ weren't beyond this benefit. All that is required is to turn to our Lord in repentance. We mustn't let the worries of this present life consume us. That would prevent us from striving with our entire heart to become like our Lord. But we must do this by striving to follow his example.

The sole aim of everything Christ did and suffered was our salvation and sharing with each of us what is proper to Him as our head. What is the characteristic of our Lord? It is mercy. Was anyone excluded from the mercy God has shown to our race? When God assumed our nature, he performed the greatest work of mercy. No one is excluded except the one who refuses to believe. We refuse to believe if we see people suffering and refuse to be merciful to them.

Whoever accepts Christ as the Incarnate Word accepts the truth that we all share a common nature with Him. But aren't we all born again of the one Spirit by which Christ himself was conceived? Is there in any of us a weakness, apart from sin, that can't be found in Christ? He too needed food and drink and sleep and rest. He too was troubled and sorrowful and moved to tears. He shared all the conditions of our servitude. He became one of us to heal the age-old wound we bear and cleanse us from self-preoccupation to teach us love for one another.

Whom do you see when you recognize a brother or sister in misery and want? You see Christ in one of his own brothers or sisters! If we walk with Jesus the Christ, we recognize ourselves in those who suffer. What price was He willing to pay for their salvation? What price are we willing to pay to show mercy to them? Where do love and mercy and compassion show themselves more clearly than in your treatment of those who share the same weaknesses you do?

All my merit comes from mercy. So long as I don't lack pity and compassion, I don't lack merit. The Lord's mercies are so many and if I share them, I am filled with merits. What does it matter that I am aware of many personal sins? Where sin abounds, the grace abounds all the more. Don't we long to sing the Lord's mercies forever? I don't look forward to singing my personal righteousness but the Lord's. I sing it when I myself reach out to others in mercy. Then I am trying to be one with Jesus in his passion and so can know that I will be one with him in his resurrection.

Thursday

## **THE GOOD PHYSICIAN'S PRIESTHOOD**

### **A reflection taken from a letter by St. Ambrose**

Our Lord is called the Good Physician. He bore our infirmities and healed our ills. This was not something he took upon himself unilaterally but a mission he received from the Heavenly Father. Scripture narrates Christ's commissioning: "*You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek*". It is not the sort of priesthood Aaron received and has other qualifications, "*Son though he was he had to learn obedience through suffering; this obedience was his lesson to us. In this way he became the source of salvation for us all.*" When he reached the full measure of his sufferings, his obedience had been perfected and he healed us and took away our sins.

No one may confer the priesthood on himself. It is given by God. Aaron's priesthood was given by physical descent and one could become such a priest without having holiness. Christ calls people to a different kind of priesthood. Scripture sees it foreshadowed by Melchizedek. He was the king of peace, which means right relation with God, and was the king of righteousness. His very name means "true king of holiness", for holiness is the fruit of righteousness. He is presented by Scripture as having "*no father, no mother, no genealogy and his years have no beginning and his life no end*". He depends wholly on God.

All this applies to Christ as the Son of God. His divine generation involved no mother and he was born of the Virgin Mary when he entered the world of time. Since he had no beginning in time but was born from eternity, how can there be an end for him? Christ is truly the beginning and goal of all things. The priesthood he calls us to depends on our receiving certain virtues and integrity in living them. Such a person must have faith and a mature Christian character. Nor is it enough to have only one of these two qualities. The two must be one and their character proven by deeds.

Paul wants us to imitate those who through faith and long-suffering have inherited promises like those made to Abraham. He received the blessing promised him and a grace which sanctified him by patiently waiting on God. Christ our Good Physician came at God's appointed time and healed spiritual illness even more than physical. Recall how many he freed from the power of evil spirits. There are also the illnesses of despair and loss of hope in God. Only those who by God's grace live God-centered hope can heal such persons. That is the sort of priesthood which we are all called to exercise if we let the Spirit shape us.

The time has come to turn to God with all our hearts. This time is a call to the priesthood of the Good Physician. So many need such healing! Open yourself to the hope that comes of whole-hearted faith so that you may be God's instruments in this priestly work. You will be leading others to God and showing them there is no disappointment for those who trust wholly in God as revealed to us by Christ. Isn't this what our Lenten observances seek? So many need healing, and you can be God's instruments to lead them to it. Strive to fit yourself to receive this gift of God. The holiness you need is that of wholehearted love for God, for God's Christ, and for the brothers and sisters Christ loves and came to redeem and heal.

Friday

## WHAT ACCEPTING GOD'S CALL DEMANDS

A reflection from Spiritual Exercises by Fr. Karl Rahner

The Annunciation begins a process John describes joyfully by saying "*and the Word became flesh*". Doing this is God's victory over all that is godless. It is the triumph of grace over all opposition! It is an unexpected, incomprehensible revelation of the immense love of God. The magnificence of this news about salvation is anticipated when Gabriel says to Mary: "*You have found grace before God and you will conceive and bear a Son. He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High. The Lord will give Him the throne of his father David and he will rule over the House of Jacob forever.*"

But the incarnation has a scandalous character. From now on we find glory in humiliation, fullness in emptiness, riches in poverty, and life in death. That is part of what St. Paul implies when he reminds us that the Word came in the flesh of sin, under the Law, in the form of a slave, and under the power of death. His failure and death-agony already begin when he is received by Mary. His kenosis has begun and the cross is becoming his throne.

God wanted these things and wanted us to find them in Jesus. The desert he entered was our human existence and its poverty and weakness and sickness and imprisonment in darkness, and life lived on a dead-end street. And yet it is life lived with a freedom that is real and true, in spite of the majesty of Divine Otherness. We no longer have to seek God because God is right where we are. God is looking at us from every point on our compass, carrying our burdens, tasting how bitter life can seem, traveling our streets, and meeting us in our own human brothers and sisters.

But perhaps we don't want some of these things—like a saving victory that is concealed in weakness! Doesn't that just confirm the distressing reality of our situation? Yes, we want the incarnation of God but in a way that enables us to escape what we don't like, and especially our boredom. Yet being called to Christian life is being called to a life of scandal to ourselves—that, for instance, of achieving glory only through the emptying that is the cross.

From the moment of the annunciation, Mary is drawn into such an inner tension. Her fate is that of her child—not only in glory but in labor, insults, and death. Oh yes, an angel greets her as perfectly graced so that her heart can be filled with joy and sing forth her Magnificat. But through this grace she became Our Lady of Sorrows.

When Mary said "Yes!" she became a suspect and a kind of outcast. After she gave birth, Jesus himself was at times a puzzle to her, and she had to accept being abandoned by Him for the sake of God's call. She had accepted this when she said, "*Behold I am the slave of the Lord! Let it happen as you have said!*" Lent is the grace of being made able to utter these words personally, becoming one with Mary and with Jesus. They turn always toward God and do God's will instead of their own.

*Saturday*

## **THE POWER OF HUMILITY**

**A reflection from a homily by Gregory Palamas**

The “spiritual champion” of evil, the devil, is full of resources for furthering evil projects. It often happens that as soon as one lays the foundations for a life of virtue this enemy undermines them using feelings of despair and lack of faith. When the walls of this house are being erected he fills us with feelings of indolence and inertia. Even when the foundations are laid and the walls erected and the roof of good works is in place, arrogance and presumption can destroy all.

Stand firm and do not be afraid. One who would resist evil must be exceedingly zealous in doing what is good. In resisting evil virtue is even more resourceful than the enemy. After all, it receives heavenly assistance. There is only One who can do all things and this One confirms all the lovers of virtue in their goodness. As a result, virtue remains unmoved by the manifold wicked wiles of the enemy and has power to restore and raise up whatever has been cast down. By God’s power, we are helped to rise up and return to God through repentance and humility.

Jesus’ parable about the tax collector and Pharisee is sufficient proof that humility can raise up whatever sin has cast down. The tax collector, in spite of his profession and of having lived in the depths of sin, joins the ranks of those who live upright lives through a single prayer, and that a short one. The burden of sin is lifted from his shoulders and he is admitted to the community of the righteous. He is justified by the One Impartial Judge. But the Pharisee is condemned by his very prayer. In spite of the good works that come of being a Pharisee, his righteousness is false. His prayer is insolence and every word he utters provokes God.

Why does humility raise us up to the heights of holiness and self-conceit plunge us into the abyss of sin? It is self-conceit and pride in what we have or have not done that leads God to abandon us—for are clearly saying we have no need of God. But when we regard ourselves as nothing and look to God for mercy then we receive it and God.

The devil is pride incarnate and arrogance is the devil’s particular vice. This sin drags everything down while humility, the particular virtue of the good angels, conquers every vice through grace and God’s help. Humility is the chariot in which we ascend to God. Humility is like the cloud upon which we will be lifted up to be with the Lord on the Last Day, as St. Paul says. It is a cloud borne of repentance and of the streams of tears that fall from a repentant sinner’s eyes. This is the disposition that raises one up to God. It accepts the truth.