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Lent: A Season of Grace Wednesday, February 13, 2008 9:15 AM COR Center
(Prayer, Fasting, Almsgiving; Purgation—letting go, and Enlightenment—confronting
negative emotions)

Going to the tradition, the word “**Lent**,” of course, is an English word, referring to the lengthening of days and, therefore, actually “**spring**.” But the Latin word *Quadragesima* is really the original word; it means **forty**. And, of course, it refers to the forty days of fasting that Jesus did. So the idea of depravation is not totally wrong. I am not sure that the way our tradition brought it about was exactly one hundred percent right either, but it was never one hundred percent wrong. So the idea is very much **focused on fasting**, but two other things as well: **fasting, prayer, and almsgiving**, which sometimes is also called “charity.” “Charity covers a multitude of sins.” It means almsgiving. So these are the three works of the Torah at the time of Jesus, **the three basic ways in which the Jewish people were supposed to be growing in holiness.**

Now when we look at these works, of course, you know that, especially in the Protestant Reformation, the whole idea of growing in holiness through what you do came under attack. But actually in the history of the Church it’s really back and forth. It’s **grace and response to grace**, so works are not to be excluded, although they are not to be taken for themselves either.

If you look at fasting, for example, in the tradition of the Church, **fasting is regarded at the key to greater self-control over all appetites.** That was the idea. The key is growth in self-awareness. **Growth in self-awareness is transformation in Christ.** You might say this is the goal of Lent in a traditional sense—transformation in Christ. The Christian is baptized into Christ. This becomes, you might say, a sacramental fact, but not necessarily an existential fact. Why? Because our awareness of Christ is so vague or dim, and so we have to grow in that awareness. Now how do we do this? Well, the early Christians simply relied on the fundamental idea of the Torah, first and foremost: fasting, prayer, almsgiving.

If we look at **almsgiving**, for example, we ask, well, why would almsgiving be growth in Christ, or how would it promote holiness, if you want to put it that way? Well, one of the most important things about most people—I think you too and me too—is our money. **We are very possessive of our money.** Very few people simply throw money around.

Even very rich people don’t throw money around. J.D. Rockefeller—he was a billionaire back when a billion was a lot of money—and he was very upset because people all thought he was nothing but a skinflint and a cheapskate. He hired someone to come and help him work on his public image. And the guy’s advice was, well, you know, Mr. Rockefeller, I think you have to be more generous. So he said okay. So he made a very major change in his life, a major conversion in his life. He started giving every bum a dime. And he hired people to take a picture of him giving a dime. Well, J.D. Rockefeller had one thing right: **he knew that he needed to change, and that that required something of generosity.** He just measured the generosity in a rather small way, but he had the idea.

So the idea of being generous has always been part of Christian teaching—and Jewish as well. **To be generous is really what God wants, and to share.** And so when we see in 1 Peter, **“Charity covers a multitude of sins,” it means almsgiving**—not love in the normal sense of the word, but giving money to others, to the poor in particular. It covers a multitude of sins. So that would be one of them. But in the history of the Church, especially early Church, nobody had any money. So it wasn’t exactly promoted too much because no one had it.

But what everyone had to do is eat. People say, “You have to eat to live”—and we do. But most people, given the opportunity, will eat more than they need. That tends to be true. And so the early Church said, well, since that’s true, we are going to **fast to increase our self-control.**

Now here is a dispute. It started in 1967 when Pope Paul VI wrote *Paenitemini*, and he said—going back to the idea of self-awareness—that **all forms of penance including fasting has to be a personal choice.** That’s why he eliminated the obligatory nature of Friday abstinence, and he eliminated the obligatory fast except on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. He said it is really good, it is really important, but you have to want to do it voluntarily.

Now you can ask yourself: Has this worked? Does voluntary fasting work? **Do people really fast when they are not obliged to fast?** I think the answer is probably no, by and large.

Now recently an historian—he wrote that beautiful book on the popes. He teaches at Cambridge, from Ireland—Eamon Duffy. Eamon Duffy has come out and said that the whole idea of modern—starting with Paul VI—modern idea of fasting is wrong because people really need to fast as a family; they have to fast as a collective. We fast as a group. We don’t fast as individuals, he says. So he is very much against the modern idea and thinks we should restore the old idea of fasting as an obligatory practice. I’m not saying I agree with him. I am just saying he is bringing up the issue. The problem is I think Pope Paul VI was right that for it to really be a spiritual value it has to be voluntary. Now I agree it could be very **difficult to fast voluntarily**, but that doesn’t mean it’s bad. That could be where the benefit comes from. But the main thing is not the fasting anyway. It’s a growth in awareness of yourself and your desires and the idea that you can actually modify your own desires.

Now if we look at **fasting from a physical viewpoint**, what does it do? First of all, it provides **more blood to the brain** because it reduces the digestive process, and therefore there is more blood available. Well, if there is more blood in your brain, you are actually sharper. Ordinarily human thinking requires the brain—ordinarily. I say that because there are very extraordinary experiences people have had outside of their bodies where apparently their brain wasn’t connected. But ordinarily our human thinking requires our brain, and therefore if the brain has more blood in it, it will be sharper and clearer and **more able to focus.** So that would then **aid prayer.** So if you see fasting and prayer as a connection, it’s not so dumb.

On the other hand, talking to all the different tables and listening to what you said, in the past this **has been presented as simply deprivation for the sake of deprivation**. But see that is not very positive—deprivation for the sake of deprivation. I remember growing up with, you know, chocolate—that was the thing. Oh, you can't have chocolate; except noon on Holy Saturday all of a sudden you could have it! Now that's for another reason, because oddly enough the Vigil of Easter was held on Saturday morning up until 1955—go figure. So therefore at that noon then you could have chocolate. Then I remember that was changed. As a kid we were very happy to have noon on Holy Saturday—we could go eat our chocolate. Then I heard from the nuns that the fast didn't really end until midnight. That was not a popular change in our house.

But I do think that I can go along with a lot of the elements of your reporting that there was a gloom, a gloom, about Lent, which doesn't really make any Christian sense. No, it really doesn't make any sense at all. **Gloominess does not belong to the Christian spirit at all**. We might be gloomy—we might be gloomy about our own personal faults perhaps, if we are aware of them. If we are more aware of them, well, maybe, you know—but then that should lead to dealing with them, and we believe that we can deal with them through the grace of God and through the love of God, and therefore because we are forgiven we should not hold onto any gloom. It should be a passing experience and surely not something imposed from above. So fasting can have a very positive physical result.

Now what else does it do psychologically? Well, fasting can also increase the sense of freedom because one is not really being controlled by one's appetites, but one is now in control. So there can be some positive psychological aspect as well, provided that it's done in the right spirit, which is what Pope Paul VI was trying to talk about. So we don't want to eliminate fasting, but we want to see it in the right attitude, that we are growing **in control of ourselves, freedom from our own appetites, and to improve clarity of mind and, therefore, the ability to pray or to do other things in a spirit of contemplation**, meaning being aware of the presence of God. Ultimately, that is the goal of Christian spirituality—contemplation, that even if we go to work, even if we go to the store, even if we do whatever we do, we are doing it with a sense of God, or that **God is not distant, but with us in what we are doing**. That's really the sense of contemplation. **So prayerful fasting—good, done in the right spirit, not deprivation for the sake of deprivation, pain for the sake of pain**. I think that is one of the ideas I grew up with. In fact, I think one of the dangers of certain forms of Christian penance is it implied that God really wants you to feel pain and that that somehow is pleasing to God, at least many people have gained that feeling or sensed that, which is not really true.

Now in regard to the Eucharist, some very interesting things I learned along the way. In the Eastern Church—the Eastern Church—**Byzantine** I am speaking of primarily—the **focus has always been more on the resurrection of Christ**. And if you ever go to a Byzantine liturgy, you will see that there is a great amount of gold and there is a great deal of elaborate singing. There is a great deal of beauty in the churches. There are many icons and gilded objects and so on. Part of this is because the liturgy always focuses on the resurrection of Christ. In fact, the whole idea of the altar area, which is separate from the people, is that the altar is really in heaven. It's a heavenly place. The people are still

on earth, but now the Eucharist, the **divine liturgy, allows you to be in dialogue with the heavenly place.** The priest is privileged to go into that heavenly place because he is ordained to do this and to bring out the bread of heaven to the people. So it is really something that is fundamentally joyful and focuses on resurrection, on heavenly reality. So oddly enough, **in Lent in the Eastern Church they dispense with Eucharistic liturgy on all weekdays.** Why? Because that was an exercise of joyfulness, so that sense of deprivation existed there too in this odd way. We are not going to have Mass now because we are going to focus on the suffering of Christ, we are not even going to celebrate his resurrection. They would have Holy Communion services on a daily basis for those who wanted them. In fact, it was encouraged during Lent in a way it wasn't during the rest of the year. Now this is odd—true, but they did it that way.

In the West, however, if you notice, Latin liturgies had a certain focus more on the death of Christ, the sacrifice of Christ, less focus on the resurrection up until 1965. And therefore **daily Mass in Lent in the Western Church became more prominent than during the rest of the year**—just the opposite of the Eastern Church because of the focus of the liturgy. So it's all growth of history. But you have to ask yourself now: what can we gain from this? I remember when I was a young associate in Westmont the pastor said, you know, it's really a shame. These people here have been coming every day to Mass during Lent, and Easter Week is the most beautiful liturgies of the year, and they are gone! I thought, well, that's true—that's true. The beautiful stories of the empty tomb and Jesus appearing to his friends—they miss all that because, well, Lent's over! So what's our motivation for attending Mass then? Is it deprivation? Why do we go? So that is something we need to think about. **What is the value of Mass? What is the value of reading the Scriptures? Why do we do it? Why do we stop what we are doing when Easter comes if it's giving us life?** That's something I want you to think about.

Someone mentioned before that in Lent you followed rules because you were told to, no understanding of why! Someone mentioned Stations of the Cross. Do you remember that? That, of course, is not necessarily old fashioned, but perhaps not as emphasized today; we have so many different things going on. Someone said that one of the penances she had to do was to kneel without touching the pew in front. That's kind of rough.

Now in the history of the Church, **forty days of Lent was also a time of preparation for Baptism.** There are two different parts to that preparation: **purification and enlightenment.** Now “purification” is the same word that we get purgatory from, to purify, to purge. So what is this about? Well, if you read what the saints say, they talk about the need to free yourself. So it's a matter of being **free of attachments.** What are attachments? Attachment is anything you hold onto that you don't really want to let God be God of. I think if Lent is a time of self-examination, I think it would be a very healthy thing. **What is it that we hold onto, because whatever we hold onto will cause us anxieties.** If you want to know where your attachments are, where are your anxieties coming from? I think this requires a certain sort of growing, again, self-awareness of the fact that we are not in control. We are not in control of our lives. And God is not in control of our lives in the way we might imagine God being in control. This is something that we really have to think about and reflect on and pray about. God is not in control either in the sense that we might think that someone should control things. In a sense

what really Christ presents to us is a view that **nobody is in control, but it's all right, because somehow it's all going to work its way through, if we trust in God. So purification is really about trust.**

Now when St. Teresa of Avila wrote her book on *The Interior Castle*, she talked very much about this. It would be very wise for us to use this as a Lenten exercise, to often go to the inner room. Jesus said, "When you pray go to your inner room." He means inside yourself, into your soul, to do this: to **go into your soul and to really ask the Lord to come and show you where your anxieties are coming from.** Sometimes we don't even know. Sometimes we have anxieties—we can't even name them. That's the nature of anxiety. Fear—almost always you know where it is coming from, but anxiety you don't. You need the Lord to help you see. And it's usually—not always—something you are holding onto, **something you don't want to let go of because you are afraid or you are not trusting that God can take care of it.** And, of course, life has many things which are frightening. That is not unusual. You are not unusual if you have fears. But maybe Lent would be a good time for us to **face our fears in a very focused way**, following Jesus' recommendation to go to our rooms and to look inside. Don't forget, with Christ we are never alone.

So we have **families**, and I think our basic anxieties begin with our families. We may have parents who are perhaps becoming senile or maybe they are suffering from all kinds of mental or physical diseases or just old age, falling apart. Maybe we have our own physical or mental problems we are dealing with. That could cause anxiety. But I think very often our anxieties are somebody else. I think very often people can handle their own suffering, but they can't handle the sufferings of others. But one of the things Jesus asks us to do is to give him all of those. **Children**—we don't know what is going to happen to our children; we can't control our children, and God doesn't control our children. But it's okay because God's love is very powerful. If we really believe in love, we have to let them go. I mean let them go in the sense we don't have anxiety anymore. We continue to love them. **We continue to hold them up, but we do not suffer anxiety because of their choices.** I don't think the Lord actually wants us to.

Now when Jesus tells the story of the Prodigal Son, he does talk about the father as if the father has a certain kind of anxiety—there is a kind of anxiety. There is **a good kind of anxiety** and a bad kind of anxiety, which is why in the Mass I always say, "Deliver us from useless anxiety," because there is a useful anxiety, like the father in the story of the Prodigal Son. And that type of anxiety is simply concern. **It's concern.** And it's what really gave the father so much joy when the Son returned. So I am not recommending indifference or apathy. But on the other hand, I don't think the Lord really wants us to be worried about others or ourselves or our finances.

Now everyone has to do their own part; each person has to do his own part in regard to putting bread on the table, roof over the head—we all know that. But **beyond doing your best, surrender it to the Lord.** And I think Lent is the time to keep going back to that inner room and doing that again. We don't just do it once in our lives. We have to keep going back. And I do think sometimes the Lord has a few little secrets to tell us if **we spend the time in that inner room**, a few secrets about what we are really worried

about. We may not be actually aware of it, so it's a **growth in self-awareness**. It's a growth also in **what is holding onto us or what we are holding onto**. So purification.

Enlightenment is the next part. Now the word "light"—light is a big issue. We have our Lenten theme: "From darkness to light." What does light mean? Well, of course, light is Christ himself, Light from Light. But what does it mean when we talk about **enlightenment in a personal sense**? Well, it really means **confronting our own inner darkness, which usually is connected to some form of negative emotion**.

Now what is a negative emotion? Emotions are motivations. Negative emotions are of the passions. They are powerful energies that can actually become a source of addiction for us. **We can become addicted to our emotions**. We can also become addicted to food with eating problems. We can become addicted to fasting, which is anorexia. I mean, there are lots of forms of addictions. **So enlightenment is facing our addictions and asking the Lord, first of all, to help us with them**.

Now sometimes our addictions are not—that word might seem a little bit too strong—well, I don't really have any addictions! Well, maybe you have some issues with anger. If you really want to know what the different negative emotions are, look at the so-called "**deadly sins**." Anger, for example, or wrath. **Wrath**, of course, is **anger that is carried too far, but what's underlying it?** Sometimes it isn't anything that is very wrathful, but an **inner kind of resentment**. Sometimes we just let resentment grow in our subconscious, not-so-awareness, and it just grows and grows and makes us very upset. And then we start to become angry with someone—why? Well, because something has been growing under there that we are not looking at. Very often it is rooted in **expectations that are unreasonable that we put on ourselves or we put on other people**. But, you know, when we are doing that, we are really **trying to take over for God**. We really don't have a right to expect other people to do what we want or what we think is best. So that's part of the **giving up of control, letting things be**. So St. Julian of Norwich says, "**And all will be well**, and all will be well, and all will be well." To grow in that sense that things will work out when you **let God be God and let everyone find their way, continuing to hold them up in prayer**—yes. So wrath is the first.

What's the second one? **Pride**. Again, we had a description the other night in Scripture study about pride and self-esteem. Pride itself like everything—anger itself is good—pride is good. These are not in themselves negative, but they can become negative when they take on too much strength. Now pride can become a very powerful force directed toward the self, **self-love and self-will**. And it's important that we recognize that sometimes when we are perhaps loving people, we are not loving them for their good, but we are loving them for something that they can provide for us. So part of enlightenment would be to really **face ourselves and our motivations**. Why do we do what we do? Are we looking for something? Are we trying to feed our own pride?

This is true also of **almsgiving**. That's why Jesus says, "Don't let your left hand know what your right is doing," because when you do and you applaud yourself; you are growing in pridefulness when, in fact, the whole idea of almsgiving is to let go and to reduce the power of the self. Instead you are increasing the power of the self. So in that

sense **good works can backfire**, which is probably what Martin Luther saw, which is why he became so negative about the works. They can backfire. So Jesus says, “When you give alms, do not blow a trumpet in front of you.” Why? Well, that’s just causing people to praise or honor you. **We are not set on earth to praise ourselves or to gain praise, but to serve God and to let God be praised.** So pride is the second negative emotion we have to look at. It’s good in itself, but it can be a hook that catches us and starts to run our life for us.

The third, **envy**. Again, people think they know what envy is. I sometimes wonder. Envy is just **rooted in comparisons**. And all of these emotions are kind of natural in one sense, but they can become something that poisons your own inner dispositions toward yourself, toward others. Envy is a little bit—pride is a little bit something else—but it looks to other people and it sees them as bigger than life, while looking at yourself and seeing you as smaller than life. So it’s actually opposite of pride in one sense. It’s a **self-diminishment**. Envy is always diminishing yourself, diminishing your gifts, not acknowledging what you really are, what God has given you, by always showing it off in contrast to someone who is better, but you don’t know if they are really better. They are only better maybe in one thing. For example, you might look at somebody and say, “Boy, can she play the piano!” Well, that’s true—great pianist—wonderful. But that person might have terrible problems you would never even want to look at! So it’s a very big mistake to compare yourself. But envy does it!

See, all these emotions work before you’re there. That’s why the growth of self-awareness means you really have to **start to slow down and look at what is happening in you without your awareness and become in touch with it**. The belief is that if you bring that into the light, the light will itself heal the darkness. It’s not magic; it won’t happen in one second, but it will help you grow free from perhaps what you always have thought: well, that’s just the way I am. Well, maybe that’s not the way God wants you to be. Maybe there is a better way. **Through enlightenment, through confrontation, you can receive the freedom of the Spirit.**

Now **avarice** is a very common emotion. It’s really a clinging emotion. It’s a possessive emotion. It’s related to jealousy in the personal area. But it’s also **looking for security**. It’s clinging to security—maybe it starts with blankets! And this was very prominent; it has been very prominent. **Almsgiving** is about avarice really. It’s about counteracting your tendency to want security through money, **voluntarily letting go of the money, therefore letting go of the security it represents so that you can be free, depending on God**. Now the person who does this the most beautifully, at least in terms of our tradition, is St. Francis: how he is just totally free of his need for money, for wealth. Of course, he created an order, and it didn’t work for the order. It’s not something you can just do once and for all either. Everything is an ongoing work toward freedom, toward light. So avarice is the next one.

Then after that we have **greed or gluttony**. Many people think greed is the same thing as avarice, but it isn’t. **Avarice is holding something in, being secure. Greed is wanting more**. The word actually “greedy,” in English, has to do with an appetite in its original form. Gluttony and greed have to do with **filling a void**—filling a void. You

know, we do have great voids in us by design because **God wants to fill our void. But we often want to fill it with something else.** And this itself can become addictive because we are creatures of habit. So enlightenment in regard to this would be to focus on that and ask the Lord to show us if we are really trying to fill ourselves up with something rather than God. It could be anything really. It could be television, entertainment. It could be books. It could be people. Are we so “out there” all the time with other people because we don’t want to be ever quiet, we never really want to be alone with the Lord? So that’s a question we can bring to the Lord. **What is it that is holding us away from letting God fill us?** What is it about life that is so exciting and so great that we think it’s enough? Of course, it’s not enough or there wouldn’t be such a thing as gluttony. **It’s the lack of satisfaction that created things bring us that creates the constant need for more.** So we face that.

Lust is the next one. Now lust is usually used in reference to sex and sexual pleasure, but actually it could refer to **any kind of pleasure, any kind of excess.** It’s actually very similar to gluttony, but it has another element in it. It has **an element of using others.** This is a little bit difficult to see, but sometimes we actually use other people. We need to look at that. People are not put on earth to help us or to give us pleasure. There are legitimate forms of pleasure, but we have to be very careful that **we don’t abuse people to get what we want.** So we might want to look at that.

Sloth—a very poor word in the Catechism. They are using a different word now—it’s good—the other word is **acedia**—acedia. Now you say, well, that’s not English. Well, it is now. Acedia means “no”—this is the prefix, “no,” like atheist—a—cedia—care—“no care.” It really means **indifference**—indifference. And you might say, well, how is that an emotion? Oh, it is. Like coldness is an emotion too. It’s an indifference. It’s an emotion that just makes a molehill out of every mountain. And this often passes today as being laidback. “Oh, I’m just laidback. I don’t care about anything!” Well, that’s really not so good. The greatest emotion is love. The greatest virtue is love, and acedia tends to be **a negation of love**—more than hate. Hate is a twisting. But this is a negation. It’s an indifference. It’s a pulling back. And, again, we are all, I think, born with certain weaknesses, and that is just some people’s weakness. Now some people believe this was a weakness for Teresa of Avila. **The fact you have a weakness doesn’t mean you are born to keep this weakness. It means that’s your way to God.** So in the inner room she would deal with this issue of her own indifference to whatever—to what is really good.

Now where did “sloth” come from. Sloth actually is an animal. It’s slow. So it’s not about being slow. It’s really about being slow to respond to what is good. **Slow to respond to God’s call or slow to respond to the truth.** It’s slowness that is meant by that.

Now I would add another one. I would add **distrust**, which is really a type of fear, and I think it can be very powerful in people. I see this in people where they are always **suspicious or distrustful** of other people or whatever, institutions. This comes often in a sort of bipolarity. Some people are distrusting, and therefore because they are so distrusting, they become **fanatical about one thing.** I don’t know if you have met this

before, but some people may be—well, they are not sure they trust the bishops and they don't trust the priests and they don't trust theologians, so—but they have one. This guy is right! That's very dangerous. So I think distrust is important because when you get down to it faith is all about trust. Isn't it? And for some people that **distrust is an emotion that is constantly blocking their willingness to let go, and sometimes distrust of God in a personal sense is transferred or transformed into an inordinate trust in an institution**, and even probably is the basis for suicide bombers, because, you see, there is such a thing as a **reaction formation in emotions**. So if I am really fearful and I'm very distrustful, I may be motivated to prove my trustworthiness and my trust by blowing myself up. That proves that my doubts about myself and my doubts about God are not real. So I would add distrust to the list of negative emotions that we need to look at: how it **affects and poisons relationships**—I have seen it all the time—how it makes people **unable and uneasy to relate to other people and to themselves, and makes people scrupulous**. Now I don't think God wants us to be scrupulous. But to not be scrupulous requires trust.

And I would add another one. Some might think it is really already said, but I would add **vanity**, because vanity is **an attachment to what is outside there rather than what is inside**. Very often when Jesus described—and I think it's important for us because we are religious people—I think religious vanity is very dangerous. And I think that is what Jesus talks about all the time with the Pharisees. I think he is talking about the problem of **religious vanity where everything is on the outside**. He says, “Well, they wash the outside of the cup, but the inside is full of soot.” Or he says, “Well, they want to be acknowledged in public places with titles or they want to sit in the front seat of synagogues.” What does that have to do with prayer? Nothing—it looks good. So I think we can be tempted to be too much into **looking good rather than being good**, which is different.

And there is a subtle issue there of **buying into a lie**. We can be deceived about ourselves and we can be deceived about others, and so I think one thing we might want to face when we go into our inner room is: Well, **where am I not really seeing the truth about somebody?** And the **falsity could be good or bad**. We might see someone and imagine they have gifts that they don't have. We may be actually **projecting** our gifts onto them. Sometimes that's what being in love is—projecting something in yourself onto someone else. Luckily it doesn't last forever—luckily. Or the other way around, sometimes we project onto other people the negative ill will or bad will that we have. We might see it in other people, but maybe it is really within ourselves. So that's the last one I would say.

I recommend just bringing it to the Lord. There is no need to make a big deal about it, but just to **recognize that those are some areas where there could be bondage. Take everything to prayer!**