A renewed focus on Lenten penance: Pope Benedict vivifies the Lenten penance

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by Judith Schneider

Introduction

Historically, Lent is the time, in the journey of the catechumen, of repentance in preparation for Baptism at Easter. In solidarity, all the baptised also prepare, through repentance, for the renewal of their baptismal promises toward Easter renewal.1 This dimension of renunciation has remained integral to Lent, to the present day.2

I will focus on Lent as an ‘incarnational’ time, a time of making ‘renunciation’ an affirmation of the dignity of the created human body.3 Pope Benedict XVI’s encyclical, Deus Caritas Est, and his related Lenten message attests to the need for making this important connection at this time.4 I will discuss the Lenten psalms from this theological point of view, paying attention to the ancient reconciling words of Psalm 51.5

The shape of the Church Year

The Church’s Liturgical Year is structured through the weekly affirmation of our eschatological hope, arising out of the historical Paschal event. This event, the mysterious application of our redemption, is expressed in a totality in Eucharist each week. It is also expressed in a year long progression to fullness culminating in the Triduum and Pentecost.6

The seasonal progression occurs through prayer and listening: affirmation and meditation; formed around an ordered proclamation of the salvation narrative from Scripture. This salvation narrative is communicated from Scripture’s various forms. In the Old Testament there is the establishment of God’s irrevocable covenant, through God’s self-revelation, and then through the prophets a foreshadowing of the Messiah, anticipating his being the ‘just one’ for all Israel. The Gospels tell of the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, who was sent as Messiah by the Father. Our Messiah, in suffering rejection so that humanity might partake of divinity, revealed himself as cosmic Saviour, promising and giving his Holy Spirit for us to become the ‘body’ which responds to him, Christ the ‘head’ (Col 1:18).8

The psalms are ancient liturgy, which functioned for Israel as a collective response to God’s promises in appeal and thanksgiving. This form, we now also participate in. The psalms express Israel’s relationship of dependence on God as creator and as the giver of the covenant. The Lenten psalms: Ps 51 (used for Ash Wednesday) and Ps 130, particularly look to a God of mercy. They await mercy. ‘Kviri eleison’ or ‘Lord have mercy’ is a derivative of this beseeching Yhwh for mercy. As those in the Gospels who looked for healing from Jesus, appealed to Jesus as ‘Lord’ (Yhwh) to show his mercy toward their wretchedness and neediness, we now have a Christian form which claps the name of Christ between two addresses to the Yawistic ‘Lord’. ‘Lord have mercy’ has become our participating entreaty supporting the celebrant’s Opening Prayer.9 It too has been retained as our response for the litany chanted on Good Friday.10

Through the recitations, readings, and the celebration of our redemptive mystery, we pray our credal truth which pervades and shapes our other secular truths. “Each moment of liturgical time recalls the past to actualize it in the present.”11 What is prayed and affirmed through hearing and responsive interaction, informs our thought construction and re-orient our disposition. We are catechised but we are not passive in this. We struggle with and confront the tensions our religious faith presents us. The credal truths we hold, interact with our everyday reality, turning the profane days, indeed all of our life sacred.

The transforming effect

This happens through the remarkable becoming distinctive. To be holy means to be distinctive.12 Through our participation in the liturgical seasons, our lives are infused with an awareness of sacramentality, with an awareness that our being and acting bear divine value. What we are and what we do signify a transcendent truth, of salvation from sin and death, of createdness for union with God. Here, a pattern of life emerges which does not necessarily correspond with the ordinary unfolding of our life in terms of ‘natural’ reactions but we allow a new meaning to be imposed on our reality. The meaning of the season is transformative through our effort to bring it to harmonize with, or contrast to, our ordinary experience, such as fasting during our joy or celebrating during our grief. This is not to deny or oppose our natural truth but it is to enhance the transcendent meaning of our life. Alongside an immediate natural dimension, our life in Christ has a transcendent dimension which unifies and completes our human meaning. For us, death gives way to new life, a narrow path takes us to our true destination. There is an ultimate meaning that we work to conform with.13 In this way, praying the Church’s Year affects our spirituality.

Jem Sullivan lists the influence the Liturgical Year has on our spirituality under the headings of time, self transcendence, obedience, and a pilgrim people.14 Firstly, she sees time as becoming subject to God’s order so that time is understood as being relative to grace, rather than a commodity to be guarded for our own purposes. Secondly, the progression of a year celebrated in common, gives us the occasion to practise self-giving in the form of surrender to the building of community. The body of the Church, spoken of by St Paul, becomes what it should be when it lives for the good of the other. Thirdly, obedience to the cycle of prayers and readings is a great practice of humility before the wisdom of the Church. We are invited to bend to a will other than our own. Finally, Sullivan directs us to the concept of an educative spiritual journey to our true destination, an arrival to the time when God will be all in all.

The season of Lent involves all these concepts. It encourages self-giving. The preparation, through self-emptying, for the reception of baptism into Christ’s own death and life, the centre of our future hope, invites exsitsis. Lent reorients priorities relative to time. Nothing is more important, in time, than developing an awareness of our need for God, and for confessing our pride and frailty. The Scripture readings and prayers are
'the way', the 'good news', and the 'medicine' which will save our lives. If we defer to the Church's wisdom in this offered pathway, we will together walk to where God draws us, to the gift of himself. This time provides us with the opportunity to encourage the other, who is young in their faith, through making ourselves into love and hope for the other, simultaneously strengthening our own hope.

The particular theology of Lent

Lent, through the narratives of Mt 4; Ex 24: 9-18, Kings 19:3-8 is presented as the occasion to journey into the desert, "where God can be encountered." On conversion, a sense of remorse which leads to a desire to turn away from a sinful life, leads us to the work of active renunciation. In Lent this is signified on Ash Wednesday by a definite verbal and physical expression of repentance. That begins a symbolic pilgrimage to the 'promised land', where our hope for union with God will be realised. This pilgrimage materializes as the invitation to a scrutiny of the bodily nature of our humanity. We wrestle to overcome our will, where it opposes surrendering to divine provident love, and find ourselves confronting the evil within which resists good. We discover ourselves in opposition to our own 'self-will' which emerges from bodily demand for satisfaction and a desire for autonomy. In solidarity with Jesus, who took on what we are, we refuse the bread that our body hungers for; refuse the power we desire; refuse the control of future knowing which satisfies us; not for the sake of an arbitrary power over self but for him 'who first loved us'(Jn 4:19).

Our bodily humanity is a vehicle for expressing love in a sacramental way. In order to express love, a new habit of interiority needs to be learned and practised so that conforming our will to God's loving will can find soil and take root. That effort swiftly turns us to a need for grace from the Holy Spirit. A very immediate opportunity for obedience, Sullivan notes, is in the willing participation that the order of the 'Church's praying year' provides for our faith development.

A fullness of symbol

What is presented for us in Lent, through the revision of Vatican II, is a renewed fullness of symbol. The restoration of the adult catechumenate has heightened the occasion to participate in the reality of the work of grace in the Church community. Again we can, in conversion, see ourselves in each other sharing in the vulnerability of our humanity. But also in allowing the self disclosure of weakness, we can share in the excitement of mutual hope, anticipating deepening community. The RCIA 'presentations' and 'scrutinies' make concrete and public that grace is in our midst and that another human journey of renunciation and perseverance has begun. Though not all of the journey will be visible to us, we know it is real in a truly physical sense. It is to this journey that a catechesis of the value and meaning of our physicality must be addressed.

Catholic teaching on human worth

Can the Church be less specific in the substance of her liturgy, with regard to who humanity is in relation to God? The revelation we have been given through Scripture should not be compromised or diluted to mean something less for the sake of comfort or palatability. To dissipate revelation into a mere psychological order, softening it into secular camaderie, may increase numbers or ever deepen a certain type of bond but it will not encourage maturity of faith. This would present an attractive meal but with no nourishment. The Acts' narrative teaches us that the Good News was not always well received but to press on with its faithful delivery!

On the other hand, as in any human family, it is our task not only to proclaim truth but to edify, to invite community through compassion and forgiveness. Where there is a natural opening for ritual and for affirming the dignity of created humanity, preceding the 'summit of the Eucharist, this should be seen as an occasion for preparation. Every opportunity should be taken to speak toward the truth about our humanity and our need for grace. The fact of the sublimity of our hope, in contrast to the limits of our physicality, is constantly before us. Thus, rather than making less of eucharistic liturgy, that fullness of truth we express should spill out into our ordinary activity.

The opportunity to speak about who we are is never far. During Lent, regardless of what other particular thing is occurring in our life, the sense of a need for help and for fortification against weakness can be recognised as ever present. We need to be strengthened, not only against our own self-defeating sabotage, but also against the external reality of anti-life. In this reality we find common ground in the threat to our humanity. We all, to some extent, experience the voraciousness of economic progress and its consequent ruthlessness depersonalisation. Few are unaffected by the harshness and the inanity of impersonal systems. That experience of devaluation sharpens the distance between present reality and the true longing of the heart. True concerns of persons can not be measured in terms of economic productivity and our bodies can not be valued as economic units. This here is rich ground for a catechesis of Catholic understanding of human life. Life is measured not in terms of expediency, but in terms of love. That spiritual understanding is begun in, and consolidated in, the Lenten liturgies.

Deus Caritas Est

Pope Benedict begins Deus Caritas Est by revaluing love and bodiliness in Christian terms. He echoes, in 1-8, John Paul II's Theology of The Body, following with further observations about the quality of love and humanity's dual nature. This is closely followed with biblical accounts of love, summarising that love involves both giving and receiving. Humanity wants both to be satisfied in the reception of love and to experience the self-giving of transcendent love. Pope Benedict explains that these two needs of love coincide in the activity of renunciation and sacrifice. However, before giving in sacrifice, we must value what is sacrificed. To give ourselves as gift means first to value this bodily gift. When we comprehend and value the extent of our physical good, we can donate ourselves, through grace, as a free and potent initiative, for God, for Church, for the other.

When we love, we go outside of ourselves for love's sake. But for us to become a source of love, we must constantly drink at the original source. Pope Gregory, the great initiator of Roman liturgy, in his Pastoral Rule, tells us "the good pastor must be rooted in contemplation." He is rooted in contemplation by setting
his mind on "Jesus Christ— the incarnate love of God". We contemplate "Jesus Christ—the incarnate love of God" in our communal liturgy.

Pope Benedict XVI's Lenten Message

Pope Benedict begins by referring to "Deus Caritas Est". He then states that because of seduction "by the lies of the evil one", we reject the possibility of being united with God in love, "in the illusion of a self-sufficiency which is impossible".

He asks us to turn to look on "Him whom they have pierced":

"Through the water of baptism, thanks to the action of the Holy Spirit, we are given access to the intimacy of Trinitarian love. In the Lenten journey, memorial of our baptism, we are exorted to come out of ourselves in order to open ourselves in trustful abandonment to the embrace of the Father. Blood, symbol of the good Shepherd, flows into us especially in the Eucharistic mystery: "The Eucharist draws us into Jesus' act of self-oblation... we enter into the very dynamic of self-giving"."

and

"Contemplating "him whom we have pierced" moves us in this way to open our hearts to others, recognising the wounds inflicted upon the dignity of the human person; it moves us in particular to fight every form of contempt for life and human exploitation and to alleviate the tragedy and loneliness and abandonment of so many people."

There may be a perception that love "in bodiliness" is not related to liturgy, but the very act of worship involves giving ourselves to the physical activity of communal prayer. We experience each other in a harmony of faith expression, when together, we willingly contemplate "him whom we have pierced". In this we leave ourselves behind. "St Benedict writes about liturgical prayer, in which the monk stands in the presence of God... and sings the psalms in such a way that mind and voice are in harmony", stating, "secret and contemplative prayer should be inspired by liturgical prayer, and should be the normal crown of that prayer". Reciting a psalm in a self-present state addresses us to God in prayer. The psalm speaks for us to God expressing the many needs and moods of humanity in the authenticity of the human state in our dependence on God. Thus, bringing our bodily selves to the celebration of liturgy is a physical affirmation of the Scriptural truth of our dependency on God. This the Holy Spirit further witnesses to, infusing us a truth, which is a "spring from which the other can draw".

The Lenten Psalm of repentance

During Lent we embark on a new path of self-disclosure of our human weakness, admitting the fragility of our psychosomatic nature suffering the damage of sin. We confess our desire to be forgiven, to be understood, to be freed from the burden of failure. We confess we want to be where the font of mercy is.

R. Be merciful, O Lord, for we have sinned. Have mercy on me, God, in your Kindness. In your compassion blot out my offense. O wash me more and more from my guilt and cleanse me from my sin (Ps 51:3-4).

The catechumen and the baptised Christian in the ongoing work of conversion examine their life, for our whole life is a continuing work of conversion.

My offences truly I know them; my sin is always before me. Against you alone I have sinned. What is evil in your sight I have done (Ps 51:5-6).

Once having turned away from sin in intention, we then face the physical work of actively resisting sin. This is the symbolic going into the desert or climbing the mountain. We are alone with the facts of who we are finite; immature; incomplete; holding only some knowledge. Confronting the particular of our own life can be frightening. But though we examine our heart alone, we share a common nature. This is where Ps 51 is so incisive. It is exact about the human state. Confessing who we are, collectively, binds us together and establishes our common need for mercy, compassion, forgiveness, and sanctification.

A pure heart create for me, O God, put a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence, nor deprive me of your holy spirit (Ps 51:12-13).

Together we speak against the self-sufficiency that deepens our painful separation from wholeness, truth to which our heart attests. We yearn for unity and declare that self-sufficiency causes our inability to be communal. In this psalm, we admit our need for God. We admit we were created vulnerable to the other, so that the other may have the opportunity to demonstrate compassion.

Give me again the joy of your help, with a spirit of fervour sustain me. O Lord, open my lips and my mouth will declare your praise (Ps 51:16-17).

Recognising the illusion of a self-sufficiency as deceptive, the thought of returning to our former sin is abhorrent to us. We recall the joy of being grateful for help, for the joy of dependence on God’s providence. We want to remain where we have tasted the joy of the Holy Spirit. We now realize what the help of the Spirit means, it is life to our being. The Holy Spirit acts as witness from within (Jn 16: 13-15) and together we praise God for the presence of this gift of witness in our midst. In our recitation of this Lenten Psalm of repentance, we are sacrament to each other as persons open to grace.

Conclusion

Through bringing our embodied selves to be with the other; and through confessing our rejection of self-sufficiency; denying the egotism of individualistic success; we begin to accompany Jesus into the desert. Acknowledging we need the help of the Holy Spirit, we are ready to plunge into the purifying waters of baptism and enter the tomb where our ultimate freedom is to be found—a body which is free to love.

References

1 Repentance is the action which precedes and precipitates baptism for the adult (as Augustine wrestled with in his Confessions). cf Jayne Newton Ahearn, (1997) "The Season of Lent", in Russell Hardman (Editor) The Years of the Year. Fremantle: University of Notre Dame Australia Press: Pastoral Liturgy Publications p.27.
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2 Renunciation was interpreted in terms of fasting. The six week fast leading up to Easter originated with Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria in the fourth century. Ahearn, *The Years of the Year* p27.

3 Traditionally, this was the recognition of the pathway of the catechumen toward his Easter reception. Ahearn, *op cit* p27.


5 Psalms 51, 91, 130 are the chief Lenten Psalms. Psalms of supplication include elements: of lament; of disorientation and loss; of reorientation.


7 A 90 day period unifying Lent, the Triduum, and Eastertide making this a more cohesive narrative. Ahearn, *op cit* p31.


9 But hidden from those who refuse to see (Jn 16:9).

10 In ancient times the reference to reception of mercy was also expressed as: “for his mercy endures forever” as the response to a litany chanted by the leader. Jovian P Lang ofm (1989). *Dictionary of the Liturgy*. New York: Catholic Book Publishing Company p368.

11 Lang, *Dictionary of the Liturgy*, *op cit* p324.


13 Rabbi Bleefield’s definition: Holy is distinctive in terms of being set apart from lower ordinary things. Perth Seminar, April 22nd 2007.

14 Yet liturgy is not impervious to the realities of joy and grief. It serves to communicate the salvific relationship between God and humanity compassionately. Weddings and baptisms are not desirable during Lent. In Judaism, an orthodox Jew cannot celebrate contrary to his lawful status or class. For example, no celebration (wedding) may be participated in during the obligatory one year of grieving following a death. Sullivan, *op cit* pp20-21.

15 Ahearn, *op cit* p27.

16 This rite includes the ancient sign of ash for repentance, fasting, and a declaration of turning away from sin, by facing the West and turning to the East and the rising sun, representing Christ the Light of the world. Sullivan, *op cit* p21.


18 Ahearn, *op cit* p32.

19 Ahearn, *op cit* p32.

20 Ahearn, *op cit* p32.

21 At the praying of the Liturgy, if the greeters, the Lenten décor, and the homily are in good synchronicity with the natural truth of persons, aiming, above all, to love and respect all persons, then we can pray in truth. Truth must expose the cause of the painful, contradictory, experience of humiliation, exclusion, rejection, of enforced servitude. Our first task is to offer dignity, inclusion, acceptance, and liberation.


23 Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est* §1-5.

24 Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est* §1-6.

25 The distinction of Pope Benedict XVI is the ascending *erōs* and the descending, *agape*. *Eros* describes our desire to possess God, and *agape* God’s self-giving love for our own sake.

26 Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est* §7; cf Jn 19:34.


28 Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est* §12.


30 Pope Benedict XVI, *op cit* §2.

31 And “Evagrius held that wordless contemplative prayer, in purity of heart, without messages or words, even beyond thoughts, could be expected to flower from the active prayer of the liturgy as its normal fulfillment.” “Evagrius was Cassian’s master”. Quote from a letter sent to me by Fr Paul Glynn sm, Holy Saturday, 2007.

32 The Word Among Us, Vol 26, no 5 (Easter 2007) St Augustine, Florida. p60.

33 Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est* §7; cf Jn 19:34.