



Lenten Solitude & Prayer

From Deacon Rick Medina

At the beginning of Lent, on Ash Wednesday, many of us probably set up goals. We may say to ourselves, “This is the year I do Lent right. This is the season I finally get my spiritual act together”. Think back for a moment of some of the things you’ve decided to do in past years at the beginning of Lent. How successful were you at following through with your plans? When Easter finally came, did it feel different?

Anyone who’s been at the doorstep of Lent knows that these forty days are fraught with temptations – there are too many things that can easily distract us. Before we begin this journey, I want to remind all of you that it’s OK if you have not been able to keep up with all your plans and goals in the past.

Transformation doesn’t come in an instant or all at once. It comes bit by bit and with daily effort. Yes, there will be days when we feel as though we are not making any spiritual progress at all. There may be times we may even feel we are slipping farther and farther from our spiritual goal. Don’t get discouraged. Fortunately, our God is kind and merciful. And patient beyond measure.

The Spirit

During Lent, whenever you feel discouragement creeping in, take a deep breath, think of the Holy Spirit within you, remember that the Spirit is there to help you begin again. When you miss a step or lose sight of your plans for prayer, fasting, and almsgiving, find a quiet place to refocus your mind and reconnect with the whisper of the Holy Spirit.

In order to know thyself and experience the Kingdom of God, here and now, I will introduce the need for Solitude and Prayer.

Solitude

For us, solitude most often means privacy or a place where we can recharge our batteries so that we may be ready to face the competition of the world with renewed strength. *But for St. John the Baptist, St. Anthony, St. Benedict, and other great saints,*

solitude is a place of conversion, the place where the old self dies, and the new self is born. To find solitude, we must discover our true self.

It takes a humble person to admit his or her shortcomings. We must be willing to embrace our imperfections as a way of encountering God. We must become conscious of our inner desires and personal weaknesses – to confront and accept them in uncompromising simplicity and radical sincerity, without rationalization or complication. If we are honest and humble, we gain the opportunity of discovering our true self, without any masks or myths. There are no ways around this struggle; there are only ways *through* the struggle.

The very first thing we need to do is set apart a time and a place to be with God and Him alone. We must be deliberate and disciplined in setting aside this time. Real discipline never remains vague or general. It is as concrete and specific as daily life itself. So commit to the time during Lent to withdraw every day, shake off compulsions, and dwell in the gentle healing presence of our Lord.

Our goal in this time of solitude is to meet God, meet our true self, and come out as another Christ. This is the place where we come to realize that it is not we who live, but Christ who lives in us, that He is our true self.

Prayer

When we go to a place to commune with God, we tend to want to learn new things about God. And that is good. But we tend to stop at the “mind” as opposed to letting things go all the way to the heart. We tend to separate the mind from the heart.

The mind and heart work differently. The mind learns; the heart knows. The mind is convinced; the heart believes. The mind is intellectual, speculative; it reads and speaks. The heart is intuitive, mystical; it grows in silence. The two should be held together, and they should be brought together in the presence of God.

The prayer of the heart is a prayer that directs itself to God from the center of the person. There are three characteristics of the prayer of the heart:

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1. The Prayer of the Heart is nurtured by short, simple prayers.
2. The Prayer of the Heart is unceasing.
3. The Prayer of the Heart is all-inclusive.

If we can practice the prayer of the heart, things will change and we will see the beauty of the Kingdom of God. It won't happen overnight. It will take time and Lent is a perfect time to practice the Prayer of the Heart because Lent is a time of self-sacrifice, self-examination. When the old self dies, we will rise up rejoicing and fully understand the Lord's resurrection at Easter. It will not make our lives easy, but simple. It will not make everything that we do sweet and pious all the time, but spiritual. It will not make our lives painless and without struggles, but restful.

The Greatest Blessing

We are blessed to have this season set apart. This is a perfect time to break from our routine, try something different, and immerse ourselves in the story of our salvation. At Lent, we typically focus or make plans for what we are going to do for God and for others. There is another side to Lent.

The greatest blessing of this season is the recognition of what God has done for us, and what God is still doing for us.

Lent invites us to the desert experience with Christ to discover our true self and experience the Kingdom of God which has already begun. It takes honesty and humility to discover our true selves. We should not be afraid of our faults and the many temptations that comes our way. Temptations, when overcome with the grace and help of God, allows us to experience God's love for us – and that is the way to peace that eludes us in this world.

We forget this because it sounds so simple. We are loved beyond measure. God has already claimed us for Himself. We are already living in the Kingdom of God whether or not we recognize it. Wouldn't it be sweeter if we see and recognize God's work within us and the whole world?

This Lenten season, I encourage you to discover and reflect on what it means to be loved by God in your time of solitude and prayer.

God Bless You,
Deacon Rick Medina

Sources and Recommended Reading:

1. The Way of the Heart: Connecting with God through Prayer, Wisdom, and Silence by Henri Nouwen
2. In the Heart of the Desert: The Spirituality of the Desert Fathers and Mothers by John Chryssavgis
3. The Imitation of Christ by Thomas A Kempis