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THE NEW LENT

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THE NEW LENT,
AEB 6501

DAY OF JOY AND FAST

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THE NEW LENT

Days of Joy and Ashes

by Henry Fehren

Ave Maria Press • Notre Dame, Indiana 46556

About the Author

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HOORAY, LENT IS HERE!

The Church has put herself on the spot.

She has opened herself wide. She is open for inspection. We can freely examine her and talk about her. We can dissect her, demand answers from her.

The Church has given each Christian more freedom, more responsibility. There are more situations in which we must make up our mind. No longer is every decision made from above, no longer is every detail of moral judgment and worship imposed on us by the Vatican.

It is a chancy business, giving us more freedom. It is like a parent allowing an adolescent to take the car for an evening date for the first time. Or letting him remain away from home overnight for the first time. The parents are a little worried about how the one emerging from childhood will use his new freedom. "We're taking a chance," they say. "He's on his own." Yet the person cannot mature and learn to make sound judgments unless he has experience in doing so.

God was the first one to take a chance. He took a chance in creating man, man made to God's image and likeness, with an intellect and a free will. Independent man, man who had to make free choices, free man. Man free to choose God and happiness or to choose his own destruction.

That Adolescent Age

Some say the present age is the adolescence of the Church. An adolescent, as he becomes aware of himself, of who he is, of what he is, begins to question things. He is somewhat skeptical. He wants to know what every-



thing means. He must know, because now he must make the decisions, he must decide what to do. And he can't decide what to do unless he knows what he is doing, unless he knows what his actions are for, what they lead to. He examines everything.

The post-Council Christian is examining the Church. The change in forms of liturgical worship is forcing him to wonder what the ritual means. He is surveying the ceremonies, saying, "What am I doing here?" It is a heady experience for most Christians. And some are fearful and worried.

Some think the Church has put herself in a dangerous position, with all this freedom. Some, without great faith it seems, wonder whether she will survive. The props seem to be gone. In matters of morals, for instance, the rigid, undeviating rules are gone, rules sometimes observed without regard to the human condition. Some think that if it were not a "mortal" sin to miss Mass on Sundays Catholics would gradually stop going; then, of course, the collections would drop off. Without material support, they think, the organized Church would peter out.

Do We Still Need Lent?

In many countries Friday abstinence is out, at least by law. The obligatory fast of Lent has also been abolished. Christians must make their own decisions about fasting. But another Lent is upon us, and with our inclination to reexamine Church practices today the faithful want to know what Lent is all about.

Do we still need Lent? Is it useful to modern man? Should Lent be abolished also? Do the traditional Lenten works of prayer, fasting and almsgiving fit contem-

porary life? What is the spirit of Lent? What should we do during Lent?

Has the Church, because of our new freedom, left us to shift for ourselves? Has she left us without guides?

I have read that in Northern states when a blizzard was forecast farmers would string a rope from house to barn. If visibility became zero during the storm a farmer could use the rope as a guide. In these days when new ideas and multitudinous opinions swirl around us, almost blinding our vision, we do have a guide. As God of old spoke to the Israelites, He still speaks to us — “Hear, my people, and I will speak” (Ps. 49:1).

“God, who in diverse ways spoke in times past to the fathers by the prophets,” says St. Paul, “last of all, in these days, has spoken to us by his son” (Heb. 1:1-2). God still speaks to us through the Church, the Body of His Son. Vatican Council II, the authentic voice of Christ, gives us, in its *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, the purpose of Lent and the twofold spirit of Lent.

We observe Lent because in recalling the mysteries of redemption “the Lord’s powers and mercies are made present and the faithful are enabled to lay hold of them and become filled with saving grace” (V, 102).

Days of Joy and Ashes

The *Constitution* proceeds to give us the twofold character of Lent: “(1) It recalls Baptism or prepares for it: (2) it stresses a penitential spirit.” In other words: the wine of baptismal joy and the ashes of penitence. Wine has long been a symbol of joy. Psalm 103, a hymn to God the creator, speaks of “wine to gladden the heart of man.” Without the recalling or anticipation of baptismal joy Lent would be a dreaded and gloomy time.

The wearing of violet and the suppression of the Alleluia remind us that this is a serious time, but seriousness does not exclude joy. We are joyful because Baptism is a great act of salvation, Baptism is our sealing a covenant with a loving and faithful God.

Nor does the second aspect of Lent, the spirit of penitence, exclude joy. For it is a joyful experience to be reconciled to the Father, to return home again, humbly to realize and regret our wrongdoing. Penitence is a joy because it is a grace, because we know that it is God who calls us to this conversion to Him. There is joy in penitence because God creates in us a new heart (Ps. 50:22). John the Baptist gave a ritual baptism as a sign of this conversion; the actual Baptism of the New Law, celebrated at Easter, is the complete acceptance in faith of God.

Penitence involves penance, and we are free to choose the means best suited to our own condition. "The Church invites all Christians without distinction," writes Pope Paul VI in his *Constitution on the Practice of Penance*, "to respond to the divine precept of penitence by some voluntary act, apart from the renunciation imposed by the burdens of everyday life."

So we freely accept the ashes, symbol of death to self, on Ash Wednesday. The fact that we voluntarily do this penance, guided by but not forced by the Church, is a sign of strength. We accept the ashes of penance with a glad countenance, for Christ says, "When you fast, don't go around looking dismal" (Matt. 6:16). If there is joy in heaven over one sinner who repents, there certainly ought to be joy in the repentant sinner himself.

WHY NOT THIRTY-NINE?

Pick a number.

That's what people of biblical days did. They chose the number 40. Scripture writers often used the number of 40 days or years when they wished to indicate a period of purification or of preparation before some important phase of God's plan for His people. The story of Noah, for instance, has the rain fall upon the earth for 40 days and 40 nights. The "corrupt" earth is purified by the flood, and God makes a covenant with Noah and his descendants.

The Israelites need 40 years in the wilderness before they are formed into the people of God. Their hardships, temptations and sufferings formed them into a sacred people. At the end of this time God again keeps His covenant with them, giving them the promised land flowing with milk and honey. "And the people of Israel ate the manna 40 years until they came to a *habitable land*" (Ex. 16:35).

Anybody Else for Forty?

Moses himself "was on the mountain 40 days and 40 nights" (Ex. 24:15-18). He tells the Israelites, "When I went up the mountain to receive the tables of the covenant which the Lord made with you I remained on the mountain 40 days and 40 nights: I neither ate bread nor drank water" (Deut. 9:8-18). Because he found the people in sin he again fasts 40 days and 40 nights, and God listens to him. "The glory of the Lord" appeared on the top of the mountain.

The prophet Elijah also goes "into the wilderness" abandoning himself entirely to God. He is fed by "an

angel of the Lord," and "went on the strength of that food 40 days and 40 nights to Horeb, the mount of God." The whole city of Nineveh fasts for 40 days, in the Jonah story, and is saved. Christ Himself fasts for 40 days and nights in preparation for His mission (Matt. 4:2).

Basic Human Need

The number, of course, is not important. What is important is that there was a set period of time "in the wilderness" for fasting and prayer in preparation for meeting God. During Lent we are formed more perfectly into the sacred people of God, we come to the holy mountain where God is present, we are purified of evil, we are saved from our own destruction, we are strengthened against the temptation to accept anything less than God.

In the first centuries of the Church, as a matter of fact, the pre-Easter period was not 40 days. At first there was only a few days' preparation for the solemnization of the Resurrection; then it lengthened to a week, and finally by the fourth century 40 days was the standard.

Our observance of Lent, then, no matter what the exact number of days, has its basis in thousands of years of human history. Modern man, no matter how technological his society or how secular his city, will always need a special preparation for great spiritual events, for renewing his covenant with God, for meeting God and sharing in God's glory.

"Go Into the Desert"

The traditional works of Lent — prayer, fasting, and almsgiving — may take new forms varied according to

a man's circumstances and culture, but they will always be observed in some form. Man needs to "go into the desert" for silence, for meditation, to face himself and to face God. "The wilderness has a necessary function in life," wrote Father Alfred Delp from a Nazi prison. "It is a great place for thinking things out, for recognizing facts, for getting new light on problems and reaching decisions. It is the quiet corner reserved for tears, prayers for help, humiliation, terror. But it is part of life."

Fasting of some type will always be necessary, for it is the effort of man to live according to his nature, to recognize his nobility as a child of God, man made to the image and likeness of God. Almsgiving is the giving of self according to the needs of others.

Jesus "taking aside the Twelve" tells them, "Now we are going up to Jerusalem" where "they will put to death the son of man and on the third day he will rise again" (Luke 18:31-33). The Church takes us aside during Lent and invites us to make this journey with Christ. It will lead to a death for us but also to a glorious resurrection, to ashes and then to drinking new wine in the kingdom (Matt. 26:29).

TURN AROUND

Until recent times a person who joined the Catholic Church was called a "convert." Because of post-Council ecumenical sensitivity it is a term we generally avoid now. But it is a term which should be applied to every Christian during Lent. For Lent is a time of conversion. A convert is one who "turns." Lent is a time for each Christian to turn back to God. Not that all Christians have turned completely away from God, but every sinful

act is to some extent a turning away from God.

In Lent we want to turn every part of us to God — Pope Paul says that there should be an “intimate and total change and renewal of the entire man — of all his opinions, judgments and decisions.” The spirit of penitence which the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* says is a characteristic of Lent is a spirit of conversion, a change of heart. The popular term for this complete turning away from evil and to God is a Greek word, *metanoia*.

There, now you’ve learned a new Greek word to spring on your friends.

But it is much more difficult to let your friends see that you, though long a Christian, are being converted again. For it implies an utterly complete turning to God, a turning that must be in the depths of one’s heart and which must be expressed externally and socially also.

Aye, There’s the Rub

In both the Old and New Testaments God again and again makes the invitation to conversion. Through the prophet Isaiah, God invited: “Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; cease to do evil, learn to do good” (Isa. 1:16-17). We read in the prophecy of Joel: “Yet even now,” says the Lord, “return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments. Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love” (Joel 2:12-13).

John the Baptist in calling the people to “repent” is issuing a call for a return to the observance of God’s covenant. Christ follows him and on His own divine

authority calls for repentance for "the kingdom of God is at hand" (Mark 1:14). Paul and Barnabas continue the tradition when preaching at Lystra, "Turn from vain things to a living God" (Acts 14:15). Every Lent is a fresh cry of the prophets, Christ, the Apostles, the Church, to conversion.

Beware the Pharisee

Jesus in telling the well-known story of the pharisee and the publican and in forgiving the sinful woman because "she loved much" is affirming that this conversion must be interior. Christ railed against the religious hypocrisy of His day, as did John the Baptist. "Hypocrites" was in the vocabulary of both of them. Even today this is one of the charges most frequently made against people professing the Christian religion. Examples are an English theologian leaving the Church, charging its "concern for authority at the expense of truth." And an American canon lawyer and columnist says in a talk to seminarians, "We seem to have developed an attitude of pious hypocrisy, which is strongly encouraged from on high, if not positively commanded."

A Lent of merely external penitential actions would not be a true conversion of heart. One reason the Church has relaxed the former rigid rules of fasting during Lent is her wish that we not think our piety is validated by mere external observances. It is easier to fast than to love a troublesome neighbor. Lent calls for a true renewal of heart.

We often are hypocritical because our faith is weak. Jesus links our repentance with faith, "Repent, and believe in the gospel" (Mark 14:15). The Gospel is the good news, but sometimes we think it is too good to be true.

True turning to God must at the same time be a turning to man, for "what you have done for these the least of my brethren you have done for me." Paul's change of life after his experience on the road to Damascus is a dramatic example of what happens in conversion.

Our penitence, our turning to God, is interior, but not merely private. It happens in the community and has its effects on our fellowman.

PRAY AS YOU GO

"And now for your penance say five Our Fathers."

Many a Catholic has heard this or something similar at the end of his confession of sins.

And many penitents have wondered why, if prayer was a good thing, it was a "penance." Also, we think of Lent as a time of penance, and know that prayer is one of the three traditional works of Lent. The difficulty is that we probably have thought of penance as punishment instead of repentance, penitence, or satisfaction. The "penance" of Lent is a healthful thing, done in joy. The "penance" of the sacrament of confession, if it means the repetition of a few prayer formulas, is seldom satisfying as a satisfaction to God. We usually forget that we are to make reparation or satisfaction also to man whom we have offended.

Anyhow, Jesus Christ made abundant satisfaction for all sinners by His death. So why should we do penance, why should we pray? First of all, forget about prayer as a punishment — it is not. (We'll pray in heaven, also, e.g. — Rev. 19:1-8). Lent is a time of penitence, of conversion, of turning to God. Having turned to God, we have a change of heart, we accept God's will to love. This response, made explicit, is prayer. It is a wonderful

experience. Lent naturally is a time, then, of more time spent in prayer, of more intense prayer, of prayer both private and public expressed and experienced more perfectly.

Stop Running, Be Still

Lent is a time to stop running, running away from God and away from ourselves. If we turn to God we will see ourselves more clearly. To do this we must figuratively go into the desert, into the wilderness. We must have silence at least in our souls. We read of many biblical figures going off alone to pray. Christ Himself "in the morning rose and went out to a lonely place, and there he prayed" (Mark 1:35). Luke tells us that Christ "withdrew to the wilderness and prayed" (Luke 1:16). Before His passion He prays alone in the garden. Before choosing His Apostles "He went out into the hills to pray; and all night he continued in prayer" (Luke 6:12).

These are noisy times, but we must find time for recollection in Lent, time to put ourselves in the presence of God, time to commune with God. Even when we pray in a group, we need withdrawal from distractions. Christ "took with him Peter, and John and James, and *went up on the mountain to pray*" (Luke 9:28).

During this prayer Christ is transfigured, appears resplendent, and the Apostles see Christ in glory. This is what prayer is meant to lead to. Lenten prayer clears our vision, lets us see God more truly, and leads us to share in the glory of Christ's resurrection at Easter.

It's Baptismal and Liturgical

Lent, as the *Constitution on the Liturgy* points out, has a baptismal character, recalling or preparing for

Baptism. Easter, of course, is a celebration of Baptism.

Baptism is the beginning of God's beauty and splendor in us. Prayer, then, is necessarily a traditional work of Lent, for it leads to closer union with God. When Jesus at His baptism was praying, "the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him" (Luke 3:21-22).

In Lent we are guided in our prayer by the liturgy. The prayers and readings of the Lenten Masses and Divine Office lead us to the most fitting praises and petitions, to sentiments of repentance. In the liturgy, since we pray with Christ, the whole Church, the angels and saints, we know that our praises are effective, theologically sound, and in accord with the Faith. Anyone who cannot take part in daily Mass should use his missal, with its different texts for each day of Lent, for prayer and meditation.

Aids to Prayer

People finding difficulty with prayer will find that if they do spiritual reading, slowly, from the Mass texts of the day, from Holy Scripture, or the best spiritual writers, they will be led more easily into prayer. Another help is to pray the psalms, those timeless but neglected prayers of the faithful of the Old Testament, of Christ, Mary, the Apostles, and the saints. The psalms are always personal but never really "private," for when an Israelite prayed them he prayed as a member of the people of God, he knew that it was always Israel who was singing praise. When a Christian prays them today he finds himself, since he is praying with Christ and the Church, elevated beyond his mere personal anxieties. "If one member suffers, all suffer together"—(I Cor. 26) —if one member prays, all pray together.

In the Lenten liturgy, we are one with the community of Christ. More alert attention and participation will result in "a new heart and a new spirit" (Ezek. 18:31).

BLOW THE TRUMPET, PROCLAIM A FAST

Is your face red?

It ought to be red with "shamefaced embarrassment," according to one Catholic editor. For millions of American Catholics "declining in the swamp of prosperous indolence" are allowed to eat meat on Friday. The American bishops have lifted the rule of Friday abstinence, except during Lent. In Poland, however, it is still a mortal sin to eat meat on Friday. Which indicates, according to the editor, that we are lacking "love of the Saviour." And the Polish decision brought "great joy . . . in dank dungeon cells."

The rest of the editorial is too silly to comment on, but the editor perhaps reflects the fears of some Catholics that the Church is deteriorating. He does not realize that the removal by Church authorities of forced fasting and abstinence is a sign of strength in the Church. We are now considered mature enough and spiritually strong enough to determine the means of penitence best suited to each one of us. Too long we have been hung up on Friday abstinence as a mark of a good practicing Catholic.

The American bishops point out that abstinence from meat is not always the most effective means of penance for each person. As an example: In my rectory we still usually abstain on Friday, but one Friday, recently, a group of unexpected visitors came in. I live in an isolated

area, no grocery store, no cafe. Charity demanded that we feed the visitors. We had no food on hand except three eggs and several pounds of venison sausage. I told the housekeeper to serve the sausage.

Her face went white.

In 65 years she had never eaten meat on Friday. She balked. Luckily two of the visitors were priests; on *their* say-so (you know about a prophet in his own land) she served the meat. It would have been a sin not to serve them the meat on this Friday.

What the "Signs" Say

Pope Paul in his *Constitution on the Practice of Penance* writes that Christ *invites* us and the Church *invites* us to conversion and penitence, and that "the Church, always attentive to the signs of the times, seeks, beyond fast and abstinence, new expressions more suitable for the realization of the precise goal of penitence according to the character of various epochs." The American bishops tell us to bind ourselves *freely* to self-denial, penitential prayer and fasting.

Fasting was and is practiced in other religions also, but our tradition of fasting goes far back into the Old Testament. For the Hebrews fasting was more a sign of sorrow and of repentance, less the strictly ascetic practice it has become for us. During the daylight hours the fast was complete but it usually was restricted to one day. Samuel, for instance, tells the Israelites, "If you are returning to the Lord with all your heart . . . direct your heart to the Lord." "And they fasted on that day," the account continues, "and said there, 'We have sinned against the Lord'" (I Kings 7:3-12).

“Return . . . With Your Whole Heart”

The prophet Joel, whose announcement the Church appropriately uses on Ash Wednesday, emphasizes fasting as a community exercise: “Blow the trumpet, proclaim a fast, call an assembly, notify the congregation, assemble the elders, gather the children.” The fast is to be a sign of conversion, “Return to me with your whole heart, with fasting . . . rend your hearts, not your garments, and return to the Lord” (Joel 2:12-17).

Christ, in insisting that fasting be not hypocritical, not for public display (Matt. 6:16), affirms the cautions of the Old Testament prophets. “On your fastday,” says Isaiah, “you carry out your own pursuits, your fast ends in quarreling and fighting.” To “lie in sackcloth and ashes,” yet lack charity and justice is utterly useless. “This rather is the fasting I wish: releasing those bound unjustly, untying the thongs of the yoke; setting free the oppressed, breaking every yoke, sharing your bread with the hungry, sheltering the oppressed and the homeless; clothing the naked when you see them, and not turning back on your own” (Isa. 58:1-10).

The Bishops Agree

This is precisely what the American bishops emphasized when alleviating the Friday abstinence: “Let us witness to our love and imitation of Christ, by special solicitude for the sick, the poor, the underprivileged, the imprisoned, the bedridden, the discouraged, the stranger, the lonely, and persons of other color, nationalities or background than your own.” The bishops add that Our Lord speaks of these works of mercy in describing the Last Judgment and that His words “should be heeded with double care during Lent.”

These may seem like long quotes, but they are so beautiful they bear repetition. I hope readers will re-read these words of Scripture and the bishops and use them as a guide for Lent, for they help us choose acts of penitence for Lent which are beneficial to ourselves and others, which reflect the spirit of Christ, which save us from sanctimonious, pharisaic, self-deceiving observances.

These words give us the true spirit of Lent, which is an inseparable combination of prayer, fasting and almsgiving. These words prove that the Church is not coming apart at the seams in these developments, but is carrying on its authentic traditions in their true sense.

The fast of Lent prepares us for the glory of Easter. If we keep this fast in the proper spirit, the prophet Isaiah assures us, "then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your wound shall be healed quickly, and the glory of the Lord shall be with you" (Isa. 58:8).

QUALMS ABOUT ALMS

"Who gives himself with his alms feeds three —
Himself, his hungering neighbor, and Me."

That may not be avant-garde poetry (it rhymes), but it sums up the third of the three traditional works of Lent, almsgiving. These verses of James Russell Lowell's *The Vision of Sir Launfal* express in two lines what a pontifical document could not do in ten thousand.

The custom of almsgiving reaches far back into the Old Testament. If there is a poor man among you, says the Mosaic law, "give to him freely, and your heart shall not be grudging when you give to him . . . open wide your hand to the needy and to the poor" (Deut. 15:10-11).

Tobit urges his son to set aside part of his goods for

almsgiving, telling him that even if his possessions be few he should give according to the little he has — “for charity delivers from death and keeps you from entering the darkness; and for all who practice it charity is an excellent offering in the presence of the Most High” (Tob. 4:10). “Give of your bread to the hungry and of your clothing to the naked,” he counsels his son, “and do not let your eye begrudge the gift when you make it” (4:16). The old Tobit, the story points out, practiced what he preached.

Proper Spirit of Giving

Here as elsewhere in Old Testament texts the emphasis is on the proper spirit of almsgiving. Almsgiving then as now is a means for atoning for sins: “Water extinguishes a blazing fire; so almsgiving atones for sin” (Sir. 3:30). Prayer, fasting and almsgiving cannot be separated, for one who prays well, who meditates on the Word of God and speaks to Him, will soon find himself fasting. If his fasting is the result of his praying, he will be giving to the poor whatever he saves by fasting.

“The fast that I choose . . . is to share your bread with the hungry” (Isa. 58:7). The pope and the American bishops, as I mentioned earlier, when they lifted the laws of fast and abstinence mention the many forms of almsgiving which even now more generously should be carried on. Almsgiving, according to St. Ambrose, is even better than fasting, and “fasting without almsgiving is like a lamp without oil.” St. Leo agrees with him: “Let the abstinence of the faithful become the food of the poor. Fasting without almsgiving is an affliction of the flesh rather than a purging of the soul.”

Not Just Money

Almsgiving is not just the giving of money, it is the giving of oneself. That is why the almsgiving of the pharisee is useless; he does it only for show, not out of love. In fact, Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 6:2-18) links together these three works of prayer, fasting and almsgiving, and in speaking of each one He repeats the warning not to imitate the hypocrites who pray, fast and give alms in order to be noticed and praised by other men.

In our parish we publish a list of parishioners with the financial report, but we do not list individual donations. Only each parishioner knows what he has given. Nor do we put the name of the donor on any windows, chalices, or other donated furnishings. In one new church I visited, nearly every stick of furniture in the building is labeled with the name of the donor. Not only does the left hand know what the right is doing (Matt. 6:3), but the whole parish does. There are various ways today of sounding the trumpet before us as we give alms (Matt. 6:2).

It All Comes Back to Love

We say that people hate being an object of charity, yet we also say that all people want love. This seeming contradiction results from the lack of love in an act of "charity," and makes charity a dirty word. Charity becomes distasteful to the recipient when it appears that the favored is giving to the disfavored, when there is any air of superiority in the giver, when the giver *condescends* to give.

"The gift without the giver is bare," so the receiver must sense the genuine love in the heart of the almsgiver; the almsgiver must realize that the receiver is doing the

almsgiver a favor in accepting the gift, for the almsgiver is needy in that he needs to give. The receiver allows the giver to do an act of mercy, to do an act of Christ, and thus assure his salvation.

The giver must give the "alms" that the needy one is in want of, not give whatever he happens to want to give. If we are sensitive to the needs of others we will see that there are many different kinds of alms. The needy one may merely want my attention, my time, my sympathy, my help in some form. Sometimes we piously give people what *we* think they should have, rather than give them that which truly satisfies *their* needs.

In Christian almsgiving both parties benefit. One who gives out of love receives in that very act more than he gives. In Christian almsgiving God is "fed" in the one receiving the alms; the one receiving the alms is benefited; and the giver lives up to his divine destiny. Thus Christ truly says: "Who gives himself with his alms feeds three — himself, his hungering neighbor, and Me."

LOVE, BABY, LOVE

Four men die in Holy Week.

One is innocent, three are guilty. One does not need repentance, but he accepts the guilt of the human race. Two do repent, one does not repent. Three die by decree, one takes his own life. One is love, one accepts love, one finds himself unworthy of love, one has no notion of love.

Jesus Christ, the Son of Man, is innocent, yet He assumes the guilt of all. He could have given us alms of all the material goods in the world, and we would never have been convinced of His love. He could only convince us of His love by giving His very self on the Cross. There

really was no other way to convince skeptical mankind of the importance of love, that we are saved by love.

Like Satan He could have taken us to a high mountain and promised us all the kingdoms of the world — but then that is all we would have, an earthly kingdom. Christ tried to teach His Apostles about love, but to the very time of the crucifixion they did not understand His death and why it had to be. He spoke of love at the Last Supper, but the Apostles argued about who among them was the most important. He had to show by the Cross the meaning of love.

But first He promises them a new kingdom, “Now I confer a kingdom on you, just as my Father conferred one on me. You will eat and drink at my table in my kingdom” (Luke 22:28-30). Beautiful words, but only later do the Apostles understand them.

Judas and the Thieves

The second of the four men to die in Holy Week is the unrepentant thief. Even on the cross he taunts Christ. He knows nothing about love, for even as the three prepare to die he has no words of compassion or sympathy. His type is still around. He is a sad figure, a primitive being who has no idea of his dignity as a person made to the image and likeness of God and destined for love.

Judas is the third man of whom we are speaking. He had some experience of love in his association with Christ. But greed was stronger than his own weak love and faith. When he sees that love is incompatible with greed, he wants to undo his betrayal of love. He thinks it is too late, for he does not understand *divine* love; he believes himself unworthy of love, he has not understood

the parable of the prodigal son — he despairs, he hangs himself.

Number four is the “good thief,” or perhaps we should say, “the thief now become good.” He is so close to our condition that we had better pay some attention to him during Holy Week. He admits his sins, he shows sympathy to Christ, he has faith in Him. “Have you no fear of God at all?” he asks the other thief, who is abusing Christ, “You got the same sentence as he did, but in our case we deserve it; we are paying for what we did. But this man has done nothing wrong.” Then he turns to Christ and says, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” It is a very touching scene, a repentant sinner admits his guilt and calls Jesus by name. It is a beautiful act of faith and love.

Jesus, showing the love which brought Him to the Cross, says to the thief, as He says to all of us, “Indeed, I promise you, today you will be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:39-43). During Lent we show our repentance by prayer, fasting and almsgiving. The foretaste of that banquet in the kingdom is in every Mass, memorial of the Last Supper. The Last Supper itself was a memorial of the Passover, of the angel of death passing over the homes of the Israelites marked with the blood of the lamb.

Renewal of the Covenant

The Last Supper meal renewed the covenant between God and men. Each Mass is a covenant meal, a meal of love, a meal which saves us from everlasting death. For not to love is to die, not to love is to despair. Sin is bad because it is the rejection of love, of God’s love. Sin can only “hurt” God in the sense that it hurts ourselves —

it hurts us because it defiles our beauty as images of God, because it despoils the best of God's creation, because we settle for less than God wants to give us.

At the great Easter Vigil we will freely renew the covenant that God has initiated with us when we renew our baptismal vows. We will do this consciously, deliberately, fully. It will be a joyful time and we will drink the new wine with Christ in His kingdom now present. Buried with Christ in the waters of Baptism, our rising with Him at Easter is reality, not rhetoric.

We accept the invitation of Christ and the Church:

“Come, let us return to the Lord:
for he has torn, that he may heal us;
he has stricken, and he will bind us up.

After two days he will revive us;
on the third day he will raise us up,
that we may live before him.

Let us know, let us press on to know the Lord;
his going forth is sure as the dawn;
he will come to us as the showers,
as the spring rains that water the earth” (Hos. 6:1-4).

