

The Hope of Lent

By *David G Bonagura, Jr. MARCH 12, 2022*

Fasting generates hunger. **Almsgiving** limits our personal desires. **Prayer** time takes from “me time.” Lent’s threefold discipline strikes at the core of our self-centered instincts.

In fighting these selfish pangs, we intensely feel the drama of our salvation play out in our own bodies. Christ our Lord, by forsaking the expectations of secular living, paved the way to eternal living that is marked not by hunger and love of self, but contentment with and love of God. Prayer, fasting, and almsgiving help us feel our weakness, our vulnerability, our helplessness – all of which tell of our utter dependence on God for our salvation.

In our weakness and dependence reside the hope of Lent.

Salvation history teaches, over and over, the futility of endeavors without God, of asserting our own will in pursuit of worldly goals. The kings of Israel chose to “go it alone” without God; for their insolence, they lost the Ark of the Covenant, the Temple, and their own kingdom.

Strength and mighty deeds are not the ways to God, who, inverting worldly assumptions, “chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong . . . so that no flesh might boast in the presence of God.” (1 Cor 1:27-28) The Gospels record story after story of God exalting those who imitate Christ with a meek and humble heart: Jairus, the centurion; the woman with the hemorrhage; Mary Magdalene.

These Biblical heroes approached Christ not with material things or boastful deeds, but with “the sacrifice acceptable to God” – “a broken and contrite heart.” (Ps 51:17) **At their most desperate moment, emptied of the stubborn pride that haunts all of us, Christ filled them with His grace**, for “the eyes of the Lord are toward the righteous, and his ears toward their cry.” (Ps 34:15)

The contrite heart is a gift of God that does not come without cost – its shaping requires sacrifice, which forces us to relinquish things we hold dear. Each Lent the Church offers the

weapons of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving to facilitate our contrition and to bring about the self-emptying that must happen for Easter's graces to take hold within us.



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Since these **pious actions are repugnant to our nature**, our rumbling tummies and chastened desires can engender self-pity, the exact opposite of the self-emptying to which we are called. We can misread these moments as signs of failure, that we are not achieving Lent's objectives nor living up to God's call to die to self.

But moments of fasting-prompted self-pity are not signs of failure – they are essential **reminders of our radical dependence on God**, of the need for a savior who is not one's self. Our Lenten sacrifices are acts of fidelity to God. These acts are essential to our spiritual lives, yet they do not save us, though sometimes we are tempted to think they do. **They are outward signs of our interior disposition**, one that, in Lent especially, can be filled with good intentions that are perpetually weighed down by human concupiscence.

Lent reminds us that the battle of salvation is not just about taming our wills. For as St. Paul teaches, “we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.” (Eph 6:12) Only Christ can rescue us from these worldly and dark forces, and He will only do so when we realize our radical dependence upon Him.

Rather than be discouraged by the discomforts of Lent, we can turn each one into a prayer. First, like the blind man sitting on the road near Jericho, feeling our helplessness, we cry out for divine help: “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” (Lk 17:38)

Second, we redirect them, while conscious that they will not mysteriously disappear, by begging God not to allow our natural desires to consume us. We cannot empty ourselves without His aid. “I sought the Lord, and he answered me, and delivered me from all my fears.” (Ps 34:4)

That God will answer and deliver us is the hope of Lent. In the midst of the world’s challenges, He will not forsake us. He does so not because we perfectly control our desires, but because He loves us. And the extra penances we take on in Lent prove to ourselves, more than to Him, that His love is worth more than anything else in our lives. Christ’s fidelity to the Father cost His life. Our fidelity is just as costly: “whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.” (Matt 16:25)

During Lent, we “go and sit in the lowest place” (Luke 14:10), for it is there, and only there, that we remember how much we need God. As we struggle, let us remember that each discomfort places us on the *Via Dolorosa* with our Lord, and these discomforts are not signs of failure, but redemption: “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.” (Gal 2:20)

***Image:** *Penitent Magdalene* by Trophime Bigot, c. 1700
[Museo del Prado, Madrid]