

Ash Wednesday
February 17, 2021

Germinating Grace

In the Intercessions for Ash Wednesday at Morning Prayer in the Divine Office of the Catholic Church is this prayer:

Today God our Father brings us to the beginning of Lent. We pray that in this time of salvation he will fill us with the Holy Spirit, purify our hearts, and strengthen us in love.

There are three things that we pray for specifically at this time of Salvation which are directly aligned with our Lord's teaching from Matthew 6. Listen again to the prayer:

We pray that in this time of salvation he will fill us with the Holy Spirit, purify our hearts, and strengthen us in love.

Think now about this threefold petition and how it aligns with the Lord's teaching in today's Gospel. There Jesus speaks about:

1. Alms giving or we could say being strengthened in love
2. Prayer or we could say being filled with the Holy Spirit
3. Fasting or we could say the purifying of our hearts.

So why is it that during Lent our petition is:

We pray that in this time of salvation he will fill us with the Holy Spirit, purify our hearts, and strengthen us in love?

It is because Lent is that season where in the words of our Lesson from 2 Corinthians, we are to be reconciled to God by increasingly accepting his grace. Paul states this idea in the negative at first and then reiterates in the positive:

***we entreat you not to accept the grace of God in vain. 2 For he says,
"At the acceptable time I have listened to you, and helped you on the day of salvation."
Behold, now is the acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation.***

Did you hear that? This is the day of salvation, the day to accept the grace of God and so it is the day to say:

We pray that in this time of salvation he will fill us with the Holy Spirit, purify our hearts, and strengthen us in love?

According to the teaching of the Lord in Matthew those who give alms, pray and fast create the appropriate disposition of the soul to receive more fully the Grace of God. Each time Jesus stresses that these acts are to be done in such a way that the reward we are looking for is the one granted by our Father in heaven, a reward that can be best understood as the increase in grace.

Think of it this way. Just as the ground needs to be made ready to receive the seeds that will then germinate and become flowers and vegetables, so too our souls need to be appropriately made ready to receive the generous and abundant mercy and grace of God so that his attributes will flower and blossom in our lives.

The Catechism is very helpful in explaining why almsgiving, prayer and fasting are the pietistic triad necessary in order for our souls to be receptive to the grace of God in Christ. There we read:

The interior penance of the Christian can be expressed in many and various ways. Scripture and the Fathers insist above all on three forms, fasting, prayer, and almsgiving, which express conversion in relation to oneself, to God, and to others.

Fasting is the gift given to us by God so that there can be conversion in relation to one's self.

Prayer is the gift given to us by God so that there can be conversion in relation to God.

Almsgiving is the gift given to us by God so that there can be conversion in relation to others.

So how is it that fasting, prayer, and almsgiving, enable more fully conversion in relation to oneself, to God, and to others? Let's think about each of them in turn.

Fasting is that discipline where we voluntarily give up some attachment to food or an enjoyment in order to be more attentive to the inner movements of our souls. When we choose to abstain from food for an allotted time or go without something we enjoy we can become more attentive to the inner state of our thought life and emotional life. This is because we are not being distracted by the satiating of appetites and in turn are more present to ourselves.

As we are more attentive to the interior movements of our own souls this can in turn bring us into a heightened awareness of our dependence upon God and in turn allow for a deepening of our conversion towards God through acts of devotion. As we are more in tune with ourselves and with God we then can more fully relate to others with mercy and so show to them acts of charity and compassion that are embodied by alms giving, the giving of money and time to alleviating the suffering of the poor.

During Lent may you therefore consider ways in which you can detach yourself from food and earthly pleasures, such as abstaining from lunch once a week during the Lenten Season and giving up an attachment to something like television and or a luxury like chocolate or alcohol.

During Lent may you consider ways in which you can be more attentive to prayer by attending a week day Mass. Friday is always a good day for this because it is when we commemorate the Crucifixion of our Lord. Joining us here on Friday evenings of the Way of the Cross at 7:30 pm can be another way to deepen your devotional life. During Lent may you consider ways to exercise Alms Giving by giving money that you might spend on yourself to your favorite charity that is working with the poor.

By taking to heart the Lord's teaching on almsgiving, prayer and fasting we experience a deepening conversion in relation to ourselves, God and our neighbour. This threefold conversion is central to Lent because with this conversion the generous seeds of grace can germinate and grow so that we can live more fully as we pray in the words of the Divine Office Morning Prayer Intercession.

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