

Almsgiving, love in action

Money is like time...there is never enough. Even if a person has a lot of money they tend to have a lot of worries about something happening to it. The secular world encourages consumerism-- the using of things. Society says happiness is having use of as much stuff as possible, so take your money and make payments on everything you can. This leads to being a slave to debt, the first fruits of one's labor going to interest and bills. At the same time, the secular world values hoarding money so you eventually won't have to work. The ideal is to make money with someone else's money. In contrast, the Christian tradition says giving away the things you have brings freedom. The material goods of this world are to be used responsibly and are to be shared amongst the human family. Tithing is the path to living within one's means, which brings true freedom and contentment. Tithing the first 10% is presented in the Bible as a matter of justice. Almsgiving is a step beyond justice in Charity. Charity is love put into service. Lent is a good time to look at the family finances and see where all the money really goes. Operation Rice Bowl is a way of curbing spending on meals to give some extra money to those in need. You might try tithing during Lent. Another thing to consider might be restraining purchases so no new debt is acquired during Lent, or even begin paying off your debt.

Conclusion

Jesus offers us a peace that the world does not give. Indeed, it is a peace the world rejects as it declares God irrelevant. Lent offers us as Christians an opportunity to slow down and listen to the call of the world around us and to listen to the call of God. Lent offers us a chance to choose which call we will respond to in our lives. May God help us respond by choosing to be transformed and by blessing our small efforts to transform our hearts, our homes, and our world.

Resources

"Secularism", The Catholic Encyclopedia, 1917. Available on-line at www.newadvent.org

"Christian Asceticism: Breaking Consumerism's Destructive Hold", Rev. Timothy Vaverek, www.cjd.org/paper/consum.html

"Do you love me?", Lenten Reflection Series, Bishop Corrada. www.dioceseoftyler.org/lent

Lent 2006

LENT: Entering the Pathway to Peace in a Secular World

*"Peace is my farewell to you, my peace is my gift to you;
I do not give it to you as the world gives peace." John 15:27*

Have you noticed? We are surrounded by SECULARISM as an ideology.

Secularism as an ideology has become a very serious challenge to the vision of Christian and human life. **Secularism** is an ideology in which religion and supernatural beliefs are not seen as the key to understanding the world and are instead segregated from matters of governance and reasoning. Secularism denies the transcendence of the human person to God which is accomplished through Jesus Christ. The Christian vision of life is that God and our relationship with Him are essential to understanding the world and our relationship to it. The Church sees the secular world as the field where the seeds of God's Kingdom are planted and cultivated by the faithful. The Christian recognizes the dignity and sacredness of the human person created in the image of God.

Secularism as an ideology is a very serious challenge to the vision of Christian life and how we celebrate Lent. Our society no longer expects prayer to actually make a difference in our world. Fasting is seen as a practical thing that can be done occasionally for the physical health of body. The poor are seen as not our brothers in need, but a problem for the government. There is even a popular program "Forty days of purpose" which, unlike Lent, is not anchored to the Passion and Easter.

The things that transformed the Roman Empire can transform our world today.

Lent presents us with the challenge to be transformed, with the help of God's grace. The observance of 40 days of fasting leads up to the Triduum. It is not just a time to get ourselves in order; it is a time to be transforming our world. The penance and discipline of early Christians was not for their own sake, but to help those going through

conversion and to bring about the transformation of the world in relationship with the sufferings of Christ in the Paschal Mystery. They expected that their prayer and penance would make all the difference in our world. This Lent, don't be content to feel good about your small sacrifices. Really consider the world you live in. How does it need to be transformed? How do you and your household need to be transformed by Christ?

Time is a gift of God.

Have you noticed that despite all the time saving devices we use, there is never enough time to complete all the things we'd hoped to? Secularism as an ideology says you need to spend time for yourself. You need to add one more thing to your schedule to be really happy. The Christian prescription is that the Lord made the Sabbath for man. Spending the day loving the Lord and praising him is a great gift. Sabbath observance is a gift to the human person. We are invited to honor the Lord's Day and to use it to give glory to Him in what we do and how we do it. We aren't called to be governed by the Pharisaical laws of prohibited activities. We are invited to live a foretaste of Heaven--to make the Lord's Day a day for family and friends, for renewal and re-creation. Not recreation that separates us from one another, but activities that help us feel refreshed and renewed in Love.

Fasting brings body and soul together.

Have you heard that America has a weight problem? We spend huge amounts on foods that weigh us down instead of foods that build us up. In fairness, it is not only our appetite for fats and sugars that pull us down--our appetite for excitement and distraction do, too. We try to find happiness in violence, fantasy, TV, media, sex, drugs, alcohol, tobacco, constantly shopping in stores and the mall and on line.... The list is nearly endless, and our secular world says, "It is ok if it makes you feel good, you deserve it." The ancient Christian tradition is that freedom is found in Christ and is strengthened by disciplining the appetites by offering up things that we could have but which we don't need. The difference between dieting and fasting is that fasting is something we engage in as a whole person. Both body and soul are joined in fasting which is freely embraced as an act of love for some other. Dieting only engages the body, and the motive is love of self, and is often motivated by pride or fear of health problems. Lent provides the Christian with the opportunity to consciously choose to discipline one's appetites as an act of love for Christ and neighbor. It frees a person to make other choices of love and

service in one's life. In addition to embracing a healthier diet for some intention, a Christian may consider fasting from TV or electronics or violent movies or video games.

As a human person we are both body and soul; we are not spirits stuck in a body. We should recognize the sacredness of our bodies and the need to treat ourselves and others with respect. Disciplining what we put into our bodies helps us live as temples of the Holy Spirit. Acts of penance also helps us as persons to be engaged in transformation of our world by offering our acts of sacrifice in love.

As Christians we have largely lost our sense of real fasting. Did you know that Christians in the past fasted everyday during Lent? They abstained from meat on Fridays and Wednesdays. At the minimum, they would follow the common rule of not eating between meals and having, at the most, two small meals which didn't exceed the third meal. If they did this level of fasting for 40 days, how can we consider it a meaningful fast when we do it for 2 days during Lent? You might consider fasting throughout the season of Lent. Or maybe fast from just certain foods, like meats.

Did you know that the fast before receiving Communion used to start at midnight? The change in the Eucharistic Fast to only one hour was intended to free people from scrupulous adherence to the fasting rule. Sadly, it has effectively eliminated any conscious appreciation of hungering for the Lord. Perhaps during Lent you might fast longer before Mass on Sunday morning or from lunch before the evening Mass.

Prayer engages us in love of God.

Our secular society sees spirituality like hats: if you find one you like you can wear one, but it certainly doesn't make any real difference. Prayer in the secular world is about feeling "at peace" or getting something you desire or even sometimes it is just plain magic. The Christian tradition is that prayer is an interpersonal relationship. God is not "the Force". He has made himself known to humanity as Father, Son and Spirit. The great cloud of witnesses are not myths; they are angels and saints who are part of God's family. Lent offers us a chance to take stock of our prayer life and choose to put more time and energy into our relationship with God. Stations of the Cross, the Rosary, Scripture Reflection groups, daily prayer, and Liturgy of the Hours are all practices we can choose to take on in response to God's invitation to spend some time with Him during the week. Christian worship on Sunday is the greatest prayer. In the Mass we join ourselves as the very Body of Christ to offer praise and glory to God the Father through Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. But prayer should (must?) be part of our lives as we go forth into the world and as we gather back again to celebrate the Lord's Day the following Sunday.