Pastor's Pen" The Tools of Lent: Prayer

The main purpose of Lent is to positively and willingly engage in what is called a "metanoia," that is, a change of heart by which we grow closer in our relationship with God and through God with one another. In the Catholic Church, we have always believed in ongoing conversion. The Scriptures, both the Old and New Testaments, repeatedly call us to such a way of life. However, many Catholics have adopted a more non-Catholic and anti-scriptural notion of "once saved-always saved" which kills the necessity for ongoing conversion in its tracks. We are Catholics and it is high time we embrace that universal call to holiness and ongoing conversion.

None of us are perfect. Unless one happens to be the Blessed Mother or the Second Person of the Trinity made flesh, we struggle with sin and temptation. We struggle with the desire to sin, called concupiscence. Jesus points to concupiscence in Matthew 26:41, when He warns us "The spirit is willing and the flesh is weak." St. Paul points to this as well when he talks about the thorn in his side that humbles him from being arrogant in II Corinthians 12:7. That Jesus wants us to effectively deal with this struggle is the heart of the Gospel on Ash Wednesday, when He prescribes three antidotes to concupiscence that help us in the battle of growing closer to Him and each other through God's grace.

For the next three weeks, I want to talk about the "three legged stool of Lent" that helps in our desire to embrace ongoing conversion: Prayer, Fasting/Abstinence, and Almsgiving. These actions take God's grace to engage in. They call for the sacrificial giving of ourselves in imitation of Christ on the Cross. The demonic will do its level best to have us dismiss these altogether, to be half-hearted and lukewarm, or be resentful of these calls. Each of these call for some reallocation of our time, energy, and resources to successfully engage. A heart that is disposed to selfishness and apathy is the devil's playground, a playground he does not want to abandon. God will give you the grace to drive him out, but you have to use it.

Let's start with prayer. Prayer is simply our ongoing communication with God. We are always communicating something to God with every choice we make. We either tell Him that He is the true Lord of our life or that we are the true lord of our life. In prayer, we are reallocating some of the time and energy of our day toward a purposed communication with God. The content of healthy prayer contains four elements: adoration, thanksgiving, penitential, and petition/intercession. In trying to be mindful of not simply praying every day, but that our prayer is more than a droning monologue, a hurling of words in God's general direction, or a laundry list of demands, being aware and insistent that all four types of prayer are present is important.

Let us start with penitential. Penitential prayer is a rightful humbling of ourselves before God in acknowledging our sins and hence our unworthiness to come into God's presence. Think of the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Luke 8:9-14) in which a Pharisee comes in to pray and we are told he "prays to himself" (Luke 18:11) in merely informing God of his own righteousness and superiority to the riff raff around him. We are also told that the tax collector beats his chest and declares himself a sinner before the Lord (Luke 18:13). Jesus says the tax collector goes away justified and not the Pharisee. We do not come

in as God's equal or superior. We enter prayer with our heads bowed, seeking mercy. We do this at the beginning of the Mass with the Penitential Rite (Confiteor, Kyrie). We have an entire sacrament aimed at helping us with our sins. I recommend to my spiritual directees a daily examination of conscience. In it we don't remind God of how awesome we are, but where we need His healing and grace to heal from the effects of our sins. Penitence is not a matter of beating ourselves, but of truthfully acknowledging our fallen and broken condition, thereby allowing God to flood us with His grace. That is why penitence is an important part of daily prayer.

This should be followed by adoration. In adoration we praise God for His love and acknowledge that He and only He is worthy of our trust and eternal love. We express our love for Him so that we stop taking for granted His grace and action in our lives. Adoration staves off the spiritual sense of entitlement that blinds us to the necessity of this relationship with God and enables us to learn to love as God loves. Perhaps a development of adoration in our prayer might well move us to see His Body, the Church, as a family and not as a business. Our failure to show God adoration bespeaks of a spoiled child who does not acknowledge God's gifts and love in our lives and takes them for granted. It is worth noting that outside of the purple seasons, our penitential rite is followed by the Gloria, an unadulterated song of adoration. It is useful in our daily prayer to use the Gloria as a template for adoration.

To this end, the next form, thanksgiving, is also important. Thanksgiving moves us from being the Pharisee in the aforementioned parable, wallowing in our own self-delusion and self-righteousness, and enables us to acknowledge that our blessings and successes, our ability to persevere, our ability to forgive, and all else is a direct result of our operating in union with God's grace. Thanksgiving is an acknowledgment of God's mercy and grace already present in our lives. It staves off despair and pride. The Mass is itself an act of thanksgiving.

Finally, we come to the type of prayer most are familiar with: petition. In asking God for things, we are acknowledging our inability to grow merely on our own merit. We acknowledge the need we have for God's grace and will to guide us and our world. Certainly, we do this during Mass in the General Intercessions (Petitions), in all of the prayers of the Mass, and it is why we have the moment of silent prayer at the end of Mass…a time to petition God. I purposely end that time with the prayer to St. Michael, the Hail Mary, and praying for the intercession of St. Joseph so that we understand that our petition is not just a matter of my or your personal prayer, but is united to the angels and saints who also petition God for our good.

This leads to the last point: intercession. This is a type of petition where we pray for the good of another. Each of us has that duty by virtue of our baptism. St. James bids us to pray for one another always (James 5:16). In fact, most of our petitions should be intercessory in nature.