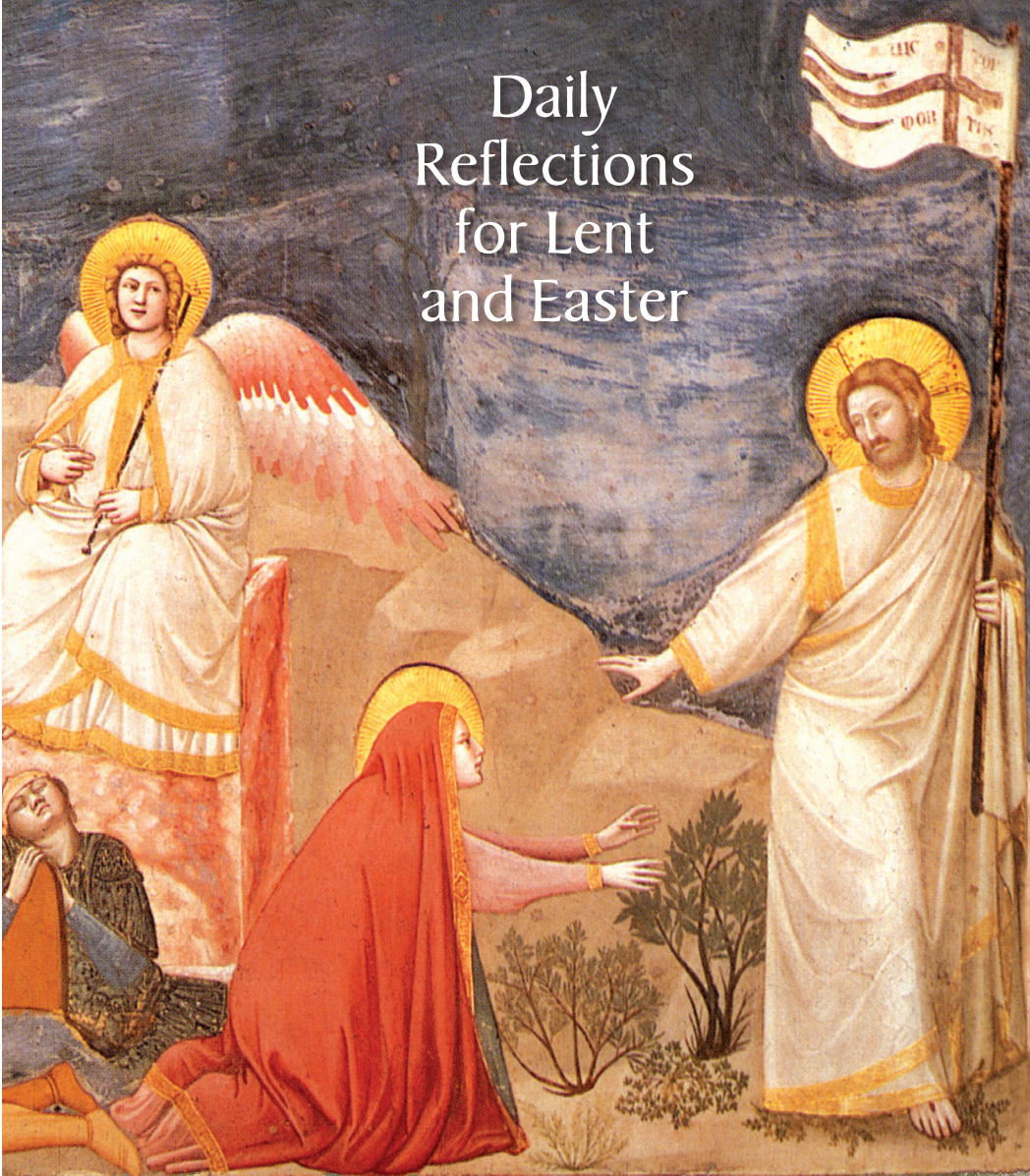


DAYbreaks

Daily
Reflections
for Lent
and Easter



FR. BYRON MILLER, CSSR

Introduction

You should put away the old self of your former way of life...and put on the new self, created in God's way in righteousness and holiness of truth.

EPHESIANS 4:22–24

Jesus begins his public ministry preaching repentance; he ends his public ministry instructing his disciples to go forth proclaiming repentance (see Mark 1:15 and Luke 24:47). His message to “repent, and believe in the gospel” is a message to turn away from something in order to embrace something greater. *Metanoia*, a Greek word, captures this fundamental transformation process of repentance and conversion. The word appears in the New Testament twenty-two times. While the Old Testament word for conversion, *shuv*, indicates a physical change of direction, *metanoia* suggests a “conversion of heart” so jarring that it leads to “a radical reorientation of our whole life” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1431). The conversion of St. Paul from Church persecutor to Church apostle typifies this kind of complete turnaround in life, and images of him falling to the ground and “seeing the light” attest to its significance (see Acts 9).

Like St. Paul, some people can turn away from addictive or sinful behaviors abruptly. Others require a more gradual transformation—for example, through the Lenten practice of giving up something for forty days, after which it is no longer a vital part of one’s identity. At the beginning of Lent, the signing of ashes accompanies those first words of Jesus’ public preaching to “turn away from sin and be faithful to the gospel.” Whether this *metanoia* is abrupt or gradual, the end result is the same: a spiritual rebirth, a dying to be born anew (see John 3).



CHRIST AMONG THE DOCTORS, GIOTTO; THE SCROVEGNI CHAPEL, PADUA

***Anima Christi* is to be prayed daily with each meditation:**

Soul of Christ, sanctify me.

Body of Christ, save me.

Blood of Christ, inebriate me.

Water from the side of Christ, wash me.

Passion of Christ, strengthen me.

O good Jesus, hear me.

Within your wounds, hide me.

Do not permit me to be parted from you.

From the evil foe protect me.

At the hour of my death, call me.

*And bid me come to you, to praise you with all your saints
for ever and ever.*

Amen.

DAYbreaks

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Ash Wednesday

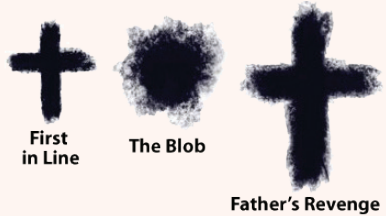
...We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

For our sake he made him to be sin who did not know sin, so that we might become the righteousness of God in him.

2 CORINTHIANS 5:20–21

Signed, Sealed, Delivered

Bill Donaghy's *Catholic Guide to Ashes* comically identifies the different shapes and sizes of the dark smudge we receive on our foreheads at the beginning of Lent. Included are a neatly formed ashen cross as "First in Line," an amorphous "Blob," and an oversized, heavily stroked cross as "Father's Revenge."



While ministering in New Orleans, on Ash Wednesday I saw foreheads bearing what may be mistaken for a flattened palmetto bug. I wouldn't attribute this splotch to "Father's Revenge" but to the aftermath of "Father's Revelry" on Mardi Gras the night before! (I speak indulgently from experience.)

Lent is the penitential season to rejoice within limits. We recognize our short lifespans and limitations, but we rejoice assuredly that the dust to which we shall one day return is glorified in Christ without limit! "The cross, with which the ashes are traced upon us, is the sign of Christ's victory over death" (*Ash Wednesday: Spiritual Medicine* by Thomas Merton).

Thus, ashes are both a sign of mortality and purification in Christ. Before the charred remains of last year's palmetto leaves take fuzzy form on our foreheads, the holy chrism oil first marked the spot at our baptism! "...The person baptized is configured to Christ. Baptism seals the Christian with the indelible spiritual mark...of his belonging to Christ" (CCC 1272). Moreover, "The faithful Christian who has 'kept this seal' until the end, remaining faithful to the demands of his Baptism, will be able to depart this life 'marked with the sign of faith'...in expectation of the blessed vision of God...and in the hope of the resurrection" (CCC 1274).

If the cross is a bit disfigured on our foreheads on Ash Wednesday, let its distortion represent a desire to reconfigure ourselves to Christ in Lent.

Now's the time to give alms, do penance, and amend our lives!

Thursday

If, however, your heart turns away...you will not have a long life.

DEUTERONOMY 30:17-18

Ad Multos Annos! (To Many Years!)

When people celebrate one hundred or more years of life, they're often asked the secret to their longevity. Some attribute it to abstaining from alcohol; others insist it's because they drink a glass of Chianti every day with dinner. One centenarian recalled an agreement with his wife when he got married at age twenty. The newlyweds decided, that, after any argument, the loser would go for a long walk to let go of the anger. Consequently, the husband attributed his long life to eighty years of fresh air.

Medical science provides sound advice on how to add years to our life, although it often contradicts its findings from previous studies. For example, red meat, eggs, coffee, and dark chocolate are not as bad as we were once told. Cigarettes and soda are worse than we thought. Alas, after giving up red meat for decades, I'm inclined to agree with the saying, "Abstinence is a wonderful thing, but only in moderation." While the common-sense advice to live a life of "moderation in all things" originated in ancient Rome and Greece, the spirit of moderation is implied in Scripture, especially in St. Paul's words of caution about excess, as when he lists "self-control" as a fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23).

Hundreds of medical studies have also shown that being spiritual can help us live longer. Even if these studies were to reverse their findings and say that being spiritual can't extend our lifespan, faith can still add fulfillment to our years of whatever number. Prayer, altruism, and a sense of belonging to a community are a prescription for holistic health.

Rx: Meditate, donate, and congregate regularly (and safely) to improve your health this Lent. If your condition weakens, consult your Divine Physician.

Friday

...The disciples of John approached him and said, “Why do we and the Pharisees fast [much], but your disciples do not fast?”

MATTHEW 9:14

A Means to Something Greater

“You will gain more by receiving scorn peacefully than if you fasted for a week on bread and water,” wrote St. Alphonsus Liguori. “It is good to humble ourselves; but it is much more worthwhile to accept the humiliations that come to us from others.”

If anyone during Lent wonders why we call it a “fast” when it seems to go by so slowly, let us recall that the Lenten fast in our Church history generally permitted no food at all until noon, and no food or beverages between meals. The duration between morning and noon was particularly hard on working people.

No Lenten practice exists as an end in itself. The practices are intended as a means to something greater. Penances and fasting should be beneficial to our own spiritual journey, and they should have an outward and upward effect. Otherwise, “what good is it if someone says he has faith but does not have works?” If someone has nothing to wear and no food for the day and nothing is done to meet their bodily needs, “what good is it” (James 2:14–18)? This is the fasting the Lord wishes:

*Releasing those bound unjustly,
...sharing your bread with the hungry,
bringing the afflicted and the homeless into your house;
clothing the naked when you see them,
and not turning your back on your own flesh.*

ISAIAH 58:6–7

A virtuous person “pursues the good and chooses it in concrete actions” (CCC 1803). Lenten disciplines are opportunities to put faith into action, for a faith that does nothing in practice is thoroughly lifeless.

Saturday

[Jesus said,] “I have not come to call the righteous to repentance but sinners.”

LUKE 5:32

Let Us Firmly Resolve

Recall the ambitious list of resolutions often created with good intentions at the beginning of this year—intentions to start walking, stop smoking, floss more, fuss less, lose weight, gain indulgences...you get the idea. If you're like me, a few commitments in this annual ritual were retired quickly. I assured myself there's always the Lenten season to revisit those commitments; or perhaps next year I'll resolve to resist making New Year's resolutions.

For Lent, a minimum of three personal resolutions are good to keep: *“O my God, I firmly resolve, with the help of thy grace, to confess my sins, do penance, and amend my life.”* Why?

Confess my sins. “The confession of evil works is the first beginning of good works,” wrote St. Augustine.

Do penance. While absolution takes away sin, it does not remedy all the disorders sin has caused. One must do something more to make amends to regain full spiritual health. This satisfaction is called “penance” (CCC 1459).

Amend my life. This challenging third component often tempts us to settle for two out of three. Nevertheless, “conversion is accomplished in daily life by gestures of reconciliation, concern for the poor, the exercise and defense of justice and right, by the admission of faults to one's brethren, fraternal correction, revision of life, examination of conscience, spiritual direction, acceptance of suffering, [and] endurance of persecution...” (CCC 1435).

First Sunday of Lent

Jesus said to him, “Get away, Satan!”

MATTHEW 4:10

Hellzapoppin: Satan Speaks



p next, an exclusive interview. Stay right there! But first, a word from our sponsor.

[Thirty-second commercial from Guns R Us]

Welcome back, viewers. Joining us now, live-streaming from Hades, is Lucifer himself to speak about final damnation!

Q. Welcome to our program. The devil. Satan. Grim Reaper. What do I call you?

A. I was offended when John called me “the father of lies” in his Gospel. I prefer, “the father of alternative truths.”

Q. OK, Great Deceiver, tell us about your recent accomplishments.

A. I’m especially proud that fewer people now believe in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist. That line from Flannery O’Connor always cracks me up: “Well, if it’s a symbol, to hell with it.” *[Sinister laughter]*

Q. I thought you’d say COVID-19 was your biggest recent triumph. Are you satisfied with the way the virus became a pandemic?

A. I admit this calamity was bungled compared to the influenza pandemic a hundred years ago. Not enough death.

Q. So, what concerns you today?

A. The total number of abortions isn’t what it used to be.

Q. Will the apocalypse include the cosmic and revolutionary cataclysms described in the Book of Revelation?

A. All that—and more! Like the doomsday prophets, I long for a spectacular, Hollywood-style ending, a climactic Armageddon battle! Good and evil going at it! But the secret to ending with a bang is for people to not see it com-