

Repentance: an Opportunity for God's Mercy

by *St. Clement of Rome*



Let us fix our attention on the blood of Christ and recognize how precious it is to God his Father, since it was shed for our salvation and brought the grace of repentance to all the world.

If we review the various ages of history, we will see that in every generation the Lord has *offered the opportunity of repentance* to any who were willing to turn to him. When Noah preached God's message of repentance, all who listened to him were saved. Jonah told the Ninevites they were going to be destroyed, but when they repented, their prayers gained God's forgiveness for their sins, and they were saved, even though they were not of God's people.

Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the ministers of God's grace have spoken of repentance; indeed, the Master of the whole universe himself spoke of repentance with an oath: *As I live*, says the Lord, *I do not wish the death of the sinner but his repentance*. He added this evidence of his goodness: *House of Israel, repent of your wickedness. Tell the sons of my people: If their sins should reach from earth to heaven, if they are brighter than scarlet and blacker than sackcloth, you need only turn to me with your whole heart and say, "Father", and I will listen to you as a holy people*.

In other words, God wanted all his beloved ones to have the opportunity to repent and he confirmed this desire by his own almighty will. That is why we should obey his sovereign and glorious will and prayerfully entreat his mercy and kindness. We should be suppliant before him and turn to his compassion, rejecting empty works and quarrelling and jealousy which only lead to death.

Brothers, we should be humble in mind, putting aside all arrogance, pride and foolish anger. Rather, we should act in accordance with the Scriptures, as the Holy Spirit says: *The wise man must not glory in his wisdom nor the strong man in his strength nor the rich man in his riches. Rather, let him who glories glory in the Lord by seeking him and doing what is right and just*. Recall especially what the Lord Jesus said when he taught gentleness and forbearance. *Be merciful*, he said, *so that you may have mercy shown to you. Forgive, so that you may be forgiven. As you treat others, so you will be treated. As you give, so you will receive. As you judge, so you will be judged. As you are kind to others, so you will be treated kindly. The measure of your giving will be the measure of your receiving*.

Let these commandments and precepts strengthen us to live in humble obedience to his sacred words. As Scripture asks: *Whom shall I look upon with favor except the humble, peaceful man who trembles at my words?*

Sharing then in the heritage of so many vast and glorious achievements, let us hasten toward the goal of peace, set before us from the beginning. Let us keep our eyes firmly fixed on the Father and Creator of the whole universe, and hold fast to his splendid and transcendent gifts of peace and all his blessings.



Harden Not Your Hearts

St. Bernard of Clairvaux

We read in the gospel that when the Lord was teaching his disciples and urged them to share in his passion by the mystery of eating his body, some said: *This is a hard saying*, and from that time they no longer followed him. When he asked the disciples whether they also wished to go away, they replied: *Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life*.

I assure you, my brothers, that even to this day it is clear to some that the words which Jesus speaks are *spirit and life*, and for this

reason they follow him. To others these words seem hard, and so they look elsewhere for some pathetic consolation. Yet wisdom cries out in the streets, in the broad and spacious way that leads to death, to call back those who take this path. Finally, he says: *For forty years I have been close to this generation, and I said: They have always been faint-hearted*. You also read in another psalm: *God has spoken once*. Once, indeed, because for ever. His is a single, uninterrupted utterance, because it is continuous and unending.

He calls upon sinners to return to their true spirit and rebukes them when their hearts have gone astray, for it is in the true heart that he dwells and there he speaks, fulfilling what he taught through the prophet: *Speak to the heart of Jerusalem*. You see, my brothers, how the prophet admonishes us for our advantage: *If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts*. You can read almost the same words in the gospel and in the prophet. For in the gospel the Lord says: *My sheep hear my voice*. And in the psalm blessed David says: *You are his people* (meaning, of course, the Lord's) *and the sheep of his pasture. If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts*.

Hear also the prophet Habakkuk in today's reading. Far from hiding the Lord's reprimands, he dwells on them with attentive and anxious care. He says: *I will stand upon my watch-tower and take up my post on the ramparts, keeping watch to see what he will say to me and what answer I will make to those who try to confute me*. I beg you, my brothers, stand upon our watch-tower, for now is the time for battle. Let all our dealings be in the heart, where Christ dwells, in right judgment and wise counsel, but in such a way as to place no confidence in those dealings, nor rely upon our fragile defenses.



The Original Meaning of Lent

by: *Dr. Marcellino D'Ambrosio*

Lent's a time of introspection. We read Exodus, and watch the Israelites grumbling, even after the amazing things God had done for them (Ex 17:3-7). In them, we recognize ourselves. For many of us, then, Lent is time for the spiritual equivalent of New Year's resolutions. We set aside time to work on ourselves for forty days so we don't end up wandering around in the wilderness for 40 years. We

do things to burn off the fat that's weighing us down, try to improve our spiritual diet, and do some spiritual exercises to strengthen the muscles we call "virtues."

But in the early days of the Church, Lent was not so much a time to focus inward. It was time for Catholics to focus outward. It was a time not just for personal growth, but for growth of the Church.

In the days of the Church Fathers, did the whole Church fast, pray, and give alms for the forty days preceding Easter? Absolutely. But Catholics did this primarily for the sake of others. There were two groups of people that were the main beneficiaries of this prayer and penance: new Catholics to be baptized at Easter and lapsed Catholics to be readmitted to communion. These folks were praying and fasting during Lent to break the power of darkness and prepare themselves to cross the Jordan into the Promised Land.

We ought to recover this ancient tradition and do penance for and with those who will enter or return to the Church at Easter. But there is something else that we should do. There are millions more who should be returning or entering. We need to tell them about Jesus.

"Evangelism? That's not my charism, not my personality." "I need more education, first." "I evangelize by example." But the second Vatican Council and all Popes since teach that **all** Catholics are called to evangelize in **both** deed and word.



True, not everyone is a Fulton Sheen, and not everyone can manage to get a degree in theology. But the story of the Samaritan woman (Jn 4) teaches the kind of evangelism that all of us can manage.

First, Jesus models it for us. He comes to a town where everyone is a member of a heretical sect and sits down by a well. A woman comes to draw water. Israelites usually don't talk to Samaritans, much less drink out of their ritually impure vessels. To boot, men usually don't make conversation with women... But Jesus recognizes her existence and affirms her by being willing to accept a drink from her. Once she gets over her shock, a dialogue ensues. It



starts out about water, wells, Jews and Samaritans, but Jesus asks her questions that throw her off a bit and make her think. He finally asks a question that leads her to "fess up" and admit her need. She's hungry for love, and has run through quite a few partners looking for the real thing. Jesus' soul-piercing glance tells her that his is the love she's been looking for. She abandons her water jar and returns to city to tell everyone about Jesus.

Did she wait till she had a Masters in Theology? Did she sit down with people and demonstrate from Scripture why he was the Messiah? No. She simply told people, with joy, confidence, and conviction, what Jesus had done for her. And she invited people to come and experience Him for themselves.

And that's how a large portion of that heretical town came to believe. And that's how a large portion of the Roman Empire came to believe. There were no crusades in stadiums, no TV preachers. Christians simply listened to neighbors and co-workers with respect and love, asked questions to find out their needs, and shared how Jesus had met similar needs in their lives. And then an invitation was issued to come check it out.



One of our Lenten resolutions this year ought to be to get over our fear of evangelizing, to be aware of the spiritual needs of those around us, and share His love. More people are looking than you think. "The fields are ripe for harvest." (Jn 4:35).