

Lent . . . a Time for Heart - Changing

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He was a good man. He was telling the truth when he said that he had kept all the commandments from his youth. Indeed the Gospel tells us that Jesus looked on him with love.

But Jesus will never let a man rest content with where he has arrived. For Jerusalem is on a mountaintop. Hence, the Lord's Lenten invitation reads: "Let us go up to Jerusalem." Jesus is always calling a man to take the next step.

So He invites the young man: "Go, sell what you have, give to the poor and come follow me." Jesus invites him to give up his own security; to give up that absolute control of his life and destiny that his wealth afforded him. In a word, Jesus offered him Costly Grace.

But because the young man had come looking for Cheap Grace, he was unequal to the challenge.

His question had been: "What must I do to get eternal life?" in other words, "How far do I have to go to get what I want?" He saw religion as a means to a goal. He wanted a simple program to follow; but Jesus offered him not a program, but a way of life.

His question to Jesus was: "How can I get what I want with a reasonable minimum of effort?" Jesus' question to him was, in effect: "How much are you prepared to give?"

It is good for us as we begin the season of Lent to reflect on this story of a man who came in search of Cheap Grace and was met with the offer of Costly Grace. It is the story of every man.

There has always been a tendency on the part of Christians to cheapen grace, to water it down, to make the Christian life a life of comfortable security, to reduce the un-

conditional demands of the Gospel to a program of rules that one can follow without too much discomfort.

May we not say that this is precisely what in past years had happened to our observance of Lent? For many of us Lent involved the pursuit of cheap Grace. We were very careful to receive the ashes on Ash Wednesday, but often with little thought afterwards of what this ceremony committed us to.

We were very careful to observe the Lenten fast, we were meticulous about not eating between meals; but at the same time we were happy to receive dispensations from the fast as often as we could think of reasonable excuses for requesting such dispensations.

We gave up something for Lent, because we would feel guilty if we did not; yet we breathed a great sigh of relief when Holy Saturday noon arrived and we could say goodbye for another year to the season of repentance.

It was precisely for this reason — namely, that so many of us had turned Lent into a reasonably comfortable program of rules aimed at achieving Cheap Grace — that in the past few years the Church had mitigated so many of the external practices that had become for us the essence of Lent.

But the Church had done this, not to make Lent less meaningful, but to restore its true meaning. Lent is a time to seek Costly Grace — the only grace which the Gospel offers.

And what is this Costly Grace? It is a call to conversion. It invites us not simply to do certain things, or to abstain from certain things, but also to undergo a radical change of heart, to change our way of thinking and acting.

The conversion to which

Costly Grace calls us forces us to face up to the reality of sin in our lives. One of the difficulties of our past attitude toward sin was that we tended to see sin only in isolated actions.

We were almost morbidly concerned about particular sinful actions; at the same time we were inclined to ignore attitudes of heart and mind that breed sin.

Sin may find its expression in individual actions, but it finds its source in the minds and hearts of men. So often when we go to confession we express our sorrow for isolated sinful actions; but we tend to be quite oblivious to the self-centeredness, the self-seeking, the selfishness that is at the root of our sinful actions.

The message of the Gospel is that Jesus came to deliver us, not so much from our sinful actions as from our sinfulness; not so much from sins as from sin. This is why the Gospel's call to conversion is not simply or even primarily a call to repentance and a reparation for this or that particular transgression.

Rather, it is a call to reconstruct our values, to remake our hearts, to accept the priorities of the Gospel.

This change of heart affects the multiple relationships in which man finds himself. The message of the Gospel is that in Jesus Christ God offers us forgiveness for our sinfulness. But this forgiveness that God offers us is no mere legal reality. It demands a response on our part.

It requires of us a profound rethinking of our lives—a rethinking that will manifest itself in the attitudes we take toward others. The disciple of Christ is taught to pray: "forgive us as we forgive those who trespass against us."

The forgiveness that God offers us cannot be isolated from our daily life and the daily relationships that make up that life.

We cannot hope for God's love and mercy, if we close our hearts to the problems of our neighbor and the problems of the world in which we live.

Lent, then, is a time of conversion, of heart-changing. It is a time to break down the barriers that separate us from one another—in the family, in society, in the Church. It is a time to uproot the prejudices—conscious or not—which prevent us from truly seeing all men as our brothers in Christ.

Lent is a time to realize that we cannot exclude anyone from our love and concern. Indeed, it is the unlovable, the lonely, the neglected, the suffering, the mistreated who have the greatest claim on our love and concern.

In today's Gospel Jesus warns us: "If you love (only) those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them." (Luke 6:32)

On Wednesday evening this week we will accept the ashes on our foreheads. We must not allow this to be an empty ges-

ture soon forgotten; rather, it must be a pledge that we shall spend this Lent in the pursuit of Costly Grace—the only grace that the Gospel offers.

May I invite you to daily participation in Holy Mass during Lent, not as an external practice undertaken simply that we may have the satisfaction of feeling that we have done something, but rather as an opportunity to open our hearts to the divine power that alone can make the conversion possible.

The Mass is the supreme example of Costly Grace. It is grace, because it is God's gift to us. It is costly because it cost the death of God's own Son.

It is my hope and prayer that this daily Lenten contact with the Selfless Redeemer will bring us a fuller understanding of the joy He intended for us when He invited us to the discipleship of the Cross.

With a blessing, I am
Devotedly yours in Christ,

Joseph L. Hayes
Bishop of Rochester



Shades of Cardinal Cushing

Appearing to be following a practice established by his predecessor, Richard Cardinal Cushing, Boston's Archbishop Humberto S. Medeiros dons a sailor hat and gives a mock salute while attending a luncheon at Naval District headquarters for Boston priests serving as armed forces chaplains. (RNS)

Where to Write Your Legislators

SENATE

William T. Smith
RD 1,
Elmira, N.Y., 14903

Theodore D. Day
RD 2, Town of Ovid,
Interlaken, N.Y., 14847

Thomas Laverne
602 Wilder Bldg.
Rochester, N.Y., 14614

James E. Powers
17 Evergreen Dr.
Rochester, N.Y., 14624

Thomas F. McGowan
704 Brisbane Bldg.
Buffalo, N.Y., 14203

ASSEMBLY

Lloyd S. Riford Jr.
West Genesee St. Rd.,
Auburn, N.Y., 13021

Constance E. Cook
209 Coy Glen Rd.
Ithaca, N.Y., 14850

L. Richard Marshall
7 Strathmont Park
Elmira, N.Y., 14905

Charles D. Henderson
30 Church St.
Hornell, N.Y., 14843

Frederick L. Warder
100 Lewis St.
Geneva, N.Y., 14456

Joseph C. Finley
38 Sherburne Rd.
RD 1,
Walworth, N.Y., 14568

Donald C. Shoemaker
833 Lake Rd.
Webster, N.Y., 14580

Raymond J. Lill
31 Wolfert Ter.
Rochester, N.Y., 14621

S. William Rosenberg
1866 Clover St.
Rochester, N.Y., 14618

Frank A. Carroll
613 Elm Grove Rd.
Rochester, N.Y., 14606

William M. Steinfeldt
217 Weston Rd.
Rochester, N.Y., 14612

Don W. Cook
1508 Lehigh Station Rd.
Henrietta, N.Y., 14467

James L. Emery
5477 Lakeville Rd.
Genesee, N.Y., 14454

Pope Urges U.S. Children To Help Fight Misery

New York — (RNS) — In his annual Ash Wednesday message opening the U.S. Catholic bishops' overseas aid appeal, Pope Paul urged America's school children to "become a mighty weapon against the misery and despair of suffering people" throughout the world.

Taped at the Vatican and broadcast across the U.S. by the major networks on Feb. 24, the pontiff's message called for "Lenten sacrifices" of money and prayers by the children.

The Pope reminded the students of the tragic events that occurred during the past year in Peru and Pakistan, along with the continuing conflict in Middle East and Vietnam, which he said "deprives young and old of their daily food and of normal living, and drains

them of all hope for the future."

"But we see, each year, each month, each day," the Pope said, "the persistent charitable work of the dedicated people of Catholic Relief Services, who bring aid and hope to millions of needy persons inhabiting the so-called Third World."

The papal message marked the opening phase of the 25th annual Catholic Relief Overseas Aid Fund Appeal, which supports global relief, self-help and social welfare projects in

70 countries.

The second and major phase of the campaign runs from March 14-21 with the collection the final day in all churches.

"This meritorious work," the Pope said, "is supported and maintained by your bishops . . . and it is your generosity that makes so many of these acts of mercy a reality . . ."

"Your little sacrifices become a mighty weapon against the misery and despair of suffering people . . . This is God's work," he declared.

8 State Legislators To Back Speno-Lerner

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taking a definite stand on Speno-Lerner said, "I am certainly in favor of aid to private schools and will support a suitable plan within the limits of funds available."

"I am awaiting with interest the Fleischmann Commission report and its recommendations."

The Fleischmann Commission is a blue-ribbon panel established last year by Gov. Rockefeller to study the school aid problem. It was originally to report this year but has postponed its recommendations until next year. School aid proponents feel that the delay is harmful because of the immediacy of the crisis.

Frederick L. Warder was another who did not take a specific position on Speno-Lerner, yet he commented:

"It is the thinking of many legislators that a compromise should be worked out whereby some of the parochial students can attend classes in public schools and have the public schools reimbursed to the extent of services rendered."

Nor did Lloyd S. Riford, Jr., make a commitment on his vote for or against the bill.

Assemblymen who did not answer are Charles D. Henderson of Hornell; Donald C. Shoemaker of Webster; Don W. Cook of Henrietta.

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