

Lent: Sacrament of Conversion

By Msgr. William H. Shannon

How shall we approach Lent of 1976? It would help us to live more fully the Lenten experience if we were to think of Lent as the Sacrament of Conversion. What do we mean by Lent as the Sacrament of Conversion? First of all, why speak of Lent as a sacrament? Obviously we are not referring to Lent as one of the seven sacraments, but rather to a wider meaning that can legitimately be given to the word "sacrament."

What is a sacrament? It is a reality that gives expression to something already going on in a person's life. It deepens that something and brings it closer to fulfillment. Thus, to take one of the seven sacraments as an example, a man and a woman perform the sacrament of marriage. The wedding ceremony (the sacramental ritual) expresses a reality already existing in their lives: their commitment to one another. Indeed, unless they are already committed to one another when they approach the altar, there is a wedding ceremony but no sacramental marriage. For the wedding ceremony (the sacramental ritual) does not produce their mutual commitment, rather it expresses a reality already existing in their lives and brings it to greater depth.

It is in this sense that we speak of Lent as a sacrament. Lent expresses something already going on in our lives and draws us more deeply into it. The question we have to answer at the beginning of Lent is: what is it that is going on in our lives? perhaps there is nothing going on that Lent gives expression to. If this is true, then Lent, regardless of what "works" we may engage in, will be basically meaningless for us.

What should be going on in our lives is the conversion process, the experience of conversion. Conversion to what? Conversion to the Lord. Conversion to letting ourselves be touched by the mystery of God and responding to this touch. Lent is a time of special awareness of the touch of God in our lives. It is the sacrament of our human experience lived in the presence of the Holy One through the Lord Jesus.

This is what it means to believe: that the God of Mystery does enter our lives in a way that we can understand, that is, in the human person of Jesus Christ. Jesus shows us what it is to be fully caught up in the presence of the Father, the Holy One while at the same time being fully human.

We know the feeling of really loving and being loved by another

person: that person is always on our mind and everything we do is in view, whether directly or remotely, of how that person will be affected. We constantly look to Jesus for this same experience which he shares with his Father and with us, initially in baptism and continually through the eucharist. Lent celebrates, that is, it expands and prolongs, this experience.

The early Church perhaps was in a better position than we are today to realize Lent as the Sacrament of Conversion. They were preoccupied with the conversion experience going on in their midst. The catechumens (adult believers who were preparing for baptism) were undergoing an intensive conversion process to ready them for the great day of their initiation into Christ on Easter.

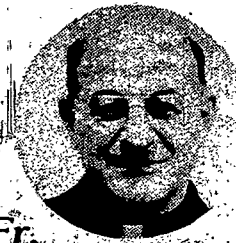
The whole Church was drawn into this process of letting God touch and penetrate their human living. They prayed with and for the catechumens; the various ministers instructed them and prepared them for their initiation into the Christian community. But, more than that, with the catechumens, the early Christians reveled in their own experience of conversion.

Conversion to the Lord, they realized, did not end with baptism. It was an ongoing, never-ending challenge in the Christian life. For no one ever reaches the point where he can say that he is totally converted to the Lord, totally responsive to the touch of the Holy One. And while the whole of the Christian life involved the conversion experience, Lent was a time of special concentration on that experience.

If Lent 1976 is to be meaningful for us, we need to recover this mentality of the early Church and see Lent as the Sacrament of Conversion. Let us pray that this

Lent we will be better able to recognize the day-to-day conversion opportunities offered to us by the Lord and allow ourselves to be drawn more deeply into them.

WORD FOR SUNDAY



Fr. **Albert Shannon**

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Mk. 2:18-22 (R1) Hos. 2:16-17, 21-22 (R2) 2 Cor. 3:1-6

In a parent meeting on first penance, I asked the question, "How can sin affect God? After all, God is unchangeable, unchangeable?"

To think that sin cannot touch God is to fail to realize that God is an **involved** God. He is deeply involved in the destiny of man; in fact, He just can't seem to let man alone. He is head over heels in love with us. He wants us to be friends with Him.

Patricia Hearst's plight, I imagine, hardly touches anyone in this area. Her trial is perhaps little more than "news" to most people. This can be, because we are not really involved with Patricia. But this is not the case with Patricia's parents. They are deeply involved with her, for they love her; she is their daughter. And because of this, Patricia can hurt them — not by accosting or assailing them directly, but by what she does to herself and with herself.

So it is with God. God is involved with us and **sin affects Him because of what it does to us.** That is what covenant theology is all about.

Covenant comes from a Hebrew word meaning "to cut." In the days before pen and paper, when a couple of sheiks of Araby wanted to make an agreement, they had to formalize it in some way. Suppose two nomadic chieftans in the time of Abraham wanted to make a pact: one for water rights, the other for grazing land. They would formalize the pact by surrounding it with ritual. Each would bring a couple of animals — sheep, goats or bullocks.

These would be split in two and the severed parts arranged opposite each other. Both parties to the pact would pass between the parts. They were saying, "Let me be torn asunder if I fail to keep my part of the pact." Then they would roast the animals and seal the pact with a banquet. God sealed His covenant with Abraham that way (Gn. 15).

Both parts of the Bible are called by the word "covenant" ("testament" is a synonym). God, on His own initiative, invited men to enter into friendship with Him. Hosea likened God's relationship to His people to that of husband to wife (R1). Jesus spoke of Himself as the groom of His people (R3).

The history of the chosen people and our history is determined by our keeping of the covenant. God Himself is faithful. But it is we who are unfaithful. Hosea's story of himself and his unfaithful wife, whom he forgave again and again, is but a picture of God's relationship to His people. Again and again, Israel left Her God, and repeatedly God waited for her to return. In the "desert" of the Babylonian Captivity He spoke to her heart and gave testimony to His love to win her back.

Israel fell, and fell again, broke the covenant, the love-relationship, with her God, because her conversion was never more than surface deep. The new rite of penance is meant to stress **radical conversion.** Unless we really decide to change our lives, the new rite will avail us little. One should not pour new wine into old wineskins. The rite is new and so should all our **attitudes** be regarding the sacrament of reconciliation. A new rite performed with the old attitudes won't last, won't change anything.

The new rite of penance compels us to ask ourselves these questions: Do I sincerely want to be set free from sin, to turn again to God, to begin a new life and to enter into a deeper friendship with God? Or will I look upon the sacrament of penance as I always have — a burden to be borne as seldom as possible?

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