

Lent — Standing Before a Plain Mirror

I recall a day of fun and laughter that I thoroughly enjoyed in my early childhood. It was a visit to a downtown Rochester department store and the attraction was a hall of mirrors of varying surfaces which distorted our physical image. There were convex mirrors and concave mirrors and mirrors that were a mixture of both. A short and fat person next to me in line rejoiced in the distortion that made him look tall and suddenly slenderized I, who then worried about being too tall and overweight, enjoyed the image of being short and stocky. But the biggest surprise seemed to come in the last mirror — for it presented the real image — plain and undistorted.



I like to think of Lent as the plain mirror which offers us the opportunity to get a good look at our real self. All analogies are inadequate to express spiritual values but they do help to instruct us. The image of a plain mirror limps because a mirror has no memory. Once we walk away from it, there is no impression that remains. Lent should leave us with a lasting memory of our own blemishes of sinfulness and need for transformation.

It is the rare person who looks longingly to a period of self-discipline and to an inventory designed for self-revelation. We tend by nature to follow the path of least resistance in direct opposition to the straight and narrow route of

discipline, and to foster a self-image that bears little resemblance to reality.

Lent can be the beginning of a period of great grace only if we will to accept it as such. For the harsh and haunting truth that Lent proclaims is this — there is but one way that leads to a personal resurrection from our status quo, and that is the path of mortification. The readings for the first Sunday of Lent remind us of this in terms which speak of casting aside the old Adam who is the progenitor of inertia and selfishness, and putting on the new Adam who is Christ, the unique source of personal vitality.

The Church in recent years, has in no way minimized the importance of self-denial. God Himself could not dispense fallen humanity from it. The reduction of the long list of Lenten regulations for fasting and abstinence only reflects a hope and confidence that we have reached a certain degree of maturity which recognizes the priority of voluntary and internal discipline over scrupulous adherence and external conformity to a series of detailed imperatives.

Self-examination cannot be dispensed with either, if we are to reach even a small measure of what we are tempted to think we are. The diocesan Lenten program this year invites us to examine ourselves in terms of our alienation from God and fellowman, and to seek reconciliation. The philosophy of the times stresses personal independence and in its wake we seem to have lost an awareness of our need to be reconciled to God and to our brothers. It has, therefore, become fashionable to regard sin as a

myth — a guilt feeling developed in the culture of puritanism.

But reflection on God's word assures us of the abiding presence of evil in the world and daily news headlines confirm this inspired truth:

"If we say, 'We are free
of the guilt of sin,
we deceive ourselves;
the truth is not to be
found in us.

But if we acknowledge our sins,
he who is just can be trusted
to forgive our sins
and cleanse us from every wrong.
If we say, 'We have never sinned,'
We make him a liar
And his words find no place in us."

1 John 1:8

This Season is designed to be a grace for all of us and especially for those who need to be forcefully reminded that Lent is much more than a fleeting ritual of one day in the year.

May this Lent be like a plain mirror that helps us to see the reality of ourselves — without distortion. The blind man in the Gospel uttered the perfect prayer for this Season: "Lord, that I may see."

The Relationship between Truth and Charity

At the General Audience on 18 February Paul VI delivered the following address.

We are continuing the great reflection that the celebration of the Holy Year has started and promoted in us, with the intention of renewing our Christian life in forms and energies. A word is now fashionable in this connection, the word "authenticity."



If we analyse it, to discover its inner meaning, in reference to human behaviour, we see that authenticity involves perfect harmony between thought and action; that is, it requires a simplicity of spirit, a transparency between the interior and the exterior aspect of conduct, a truthfulness that passes with the same light through the mind, the feelings, the words, facts and signs.

Qualifying a man who practises this virtue of truth in his own life, we usually speak of an authentic character or personality.

If we wish to use a scriptural expression for this superior style of being and acting, we can find it in the inexhaustible and elevating

wisdom of the apostle Paul, who teaches us that we are to follow "the truth, in a spirit of charity" (Eph. 4, 15): "veritatem facientes in caritate crescimus in illo per omnia, qui est caput Christus."

Truth and charity, a simple expression, but not easy on the psychological and social plane, in any case, it comprises and represents those fundamental virtues that define socially the ideal man, that is the Christian, and in a higher degree, the saint.

These two moral attitudes plainly seem complementary, that is, made to integrate each other in the order of human society; and so it is, according to the superior exigency of moral unity, characteristic of the perfect man.

But in the experience of practical life we cannot but note that often the social profession of a particular truth leads to intransigence and intolerance; and that the social profession of an agnostic philanthropy presupposes an ideological indifference which often makes it unrealistic and not always really generous and faithful.

It is difficult to profess an opinion, which we consider an expression of truth, and be understanding and indulgent towards those who do not share it, just as it is difficult to show real love of one's neighbor if we disregard ideal

principles that make him worthy, in our eyes, of real abnegation and tiresome service.

In other words, faith without charity may become selfish in human relationships, and charity, without faith, may lack the motives that make it persevering and heroic.

As can be seen, the synthesis between truth and charity touches very important aspects of life, which can change it, as not infrequently happens in historical reality, into the exact opposite!

It is well for us that the recent Council confirmed us in adherence to both, that is, to truth, which is always such as to deserve the homage and if necessary also the sacrifice of our life to profess it, spread it and defend it; and at the same time to charity, the teacher of freedom, goodness, patience and abnegation in our every relation with those to whom the Gospel gives the name of brothers.

These are not a play upon words, they are not conflicts of schools, they are not inevitable dramas of history; they are intrinsic problems of human nature and social life, which find their humble and triumphant solution in the Gospel, and therefore in that "civilization of love" which we are longing for, as the legacy of the Holy Year.

THE OPEN WINDOW

Fr. Louis Hohman

You spoke of a need to change in attitude toward the confession of our sins, in so far as our confessions were simply a laundry list of specific acts. Tell me more about our changed attitudes toward sin.

First of all you should recognize that the very fact that we have commonly referred to the Sacrament of Penance as Con-

fession means that much too much emphasis was placed upon the confession of sins, especially as individual acts. When I perform an act which is sinful it invariably arises from my basic selfishness in attitude and goal. In other words, I am motivated to perform this particular act by my selfishness, whether it be my vanity, greed, gluttony, lust, envy, anger or sloth. It is obviously important, therefore, that I understand why I am doing certain things and try to eliminate the causes as well as the acts themselves. Ordinarily this cannot be done simply by saying, "I'm not going to do that thing anymore." So what we are saying is that far more important than the listing of sinful acts is the change of attitude, of mind and heart which will lead me to eliminate those acts from my life and become a more Christian person.

You also spoke of a need for change of attitude toward sin as being strictly personal, between us and God, rather than as invariably

The New Rite of Penance

having an effect upon the wider community. What does this mean? How do our sins invariably have an effect upon the wider community?

Sometimes this is very difficult to see, because what we do doesn't seem to relate to anybody else or anything else. But if we look at it from the point of view of all our acts contributing to either the betterment of society or the detriment of society, depending on how good we are, then we might begin to understand that there is no such thing as a strictly private sin. If I, for example, were to mess up my life through drink or drugs in such a way that I could not make the contribution to society my talents might expect then I have sinned against society. I would be like a father of a family who by his intemperance deprives his family of what is their right. Therefore, any

sin which lessens me also lessens the society which I am called to build up and to serve. We can see this point very clearly for example, in terms of slave owners who for the building up of their own economic fortune used human beings. Their sin had a direct and terrible effect upon society as a whole not only in their own place and time but for many centuries into the future. Every sin in its own way has a similar outreaching and longlasting effect. The principal reason for having communal penance is that we might become more aware of our involvement in the evils of society and the share we must carry of the burden of guilt for those evils. It is not that the guilt wasn't there. It is only that we weren't aware of it.

Now to the third change of attitude, or rather emphasis, from the

confession of sin itself to the need for a change in our lives. What is this all about?

As I pointed out before, far too much emphasis was placed upon the recitation of sins committed, at least on the part of the penitent. Far too little emphasis was placed upon the firm purpose of amendment, the "What am I going to do about this thing" element in confession. In the New Rites of Reconciliation we will try to come into more meaningful contact with God to see Him not primarily as a judge, condemning our bad acts but rather as a loving father who "wills not the death of the sinner but rather that he be converted and live." We will see that God is interested in nothing so much as our healing, our conversion, our newness of life, our being fulfilled as persons and our incorporation into His own life.