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Penitential

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Bernadette then shows her leg to reveal a tumor. Sister Marie Therese realizes that Bernadette has suffered unspeakable pain patiently and silently for years.

She now believes Bernadette is worthy of the vision she has received.

Such an attitude about suffering and penitential practices likely seems alien, even repulsive, to people in the United States today.

In an article in the February 1993 issue of *Homiletic and Pastoral Review*, Father Robert J. Batule, a priest of the Diocese of Rockville Centre, N.Y., observed, for example, that such practices run "counter to the conventional wisdom of our modern culture. To a great degree, our culture dismisses suffering as masochistic or a hindrance to the emergence of a new humanity."

Yet, as Lawrence S. Cunningham noted in his 1983 book *The Catholic Heritage*, "One of the great ironies of our times is that people will fast for their waistlines and deny themselves for cardiovascular fitness (think of the asceticism of the runner), but regard ascetic practices in the search for God suspicious."

In 1943, however, suffering willingly borne — and even self-inflicted penitential acts — would not have seemed strange.

Indeed, penitential acts performed in the name of God have a long history in Christian legend and beliefs, and have long been associated with the season of Lent.

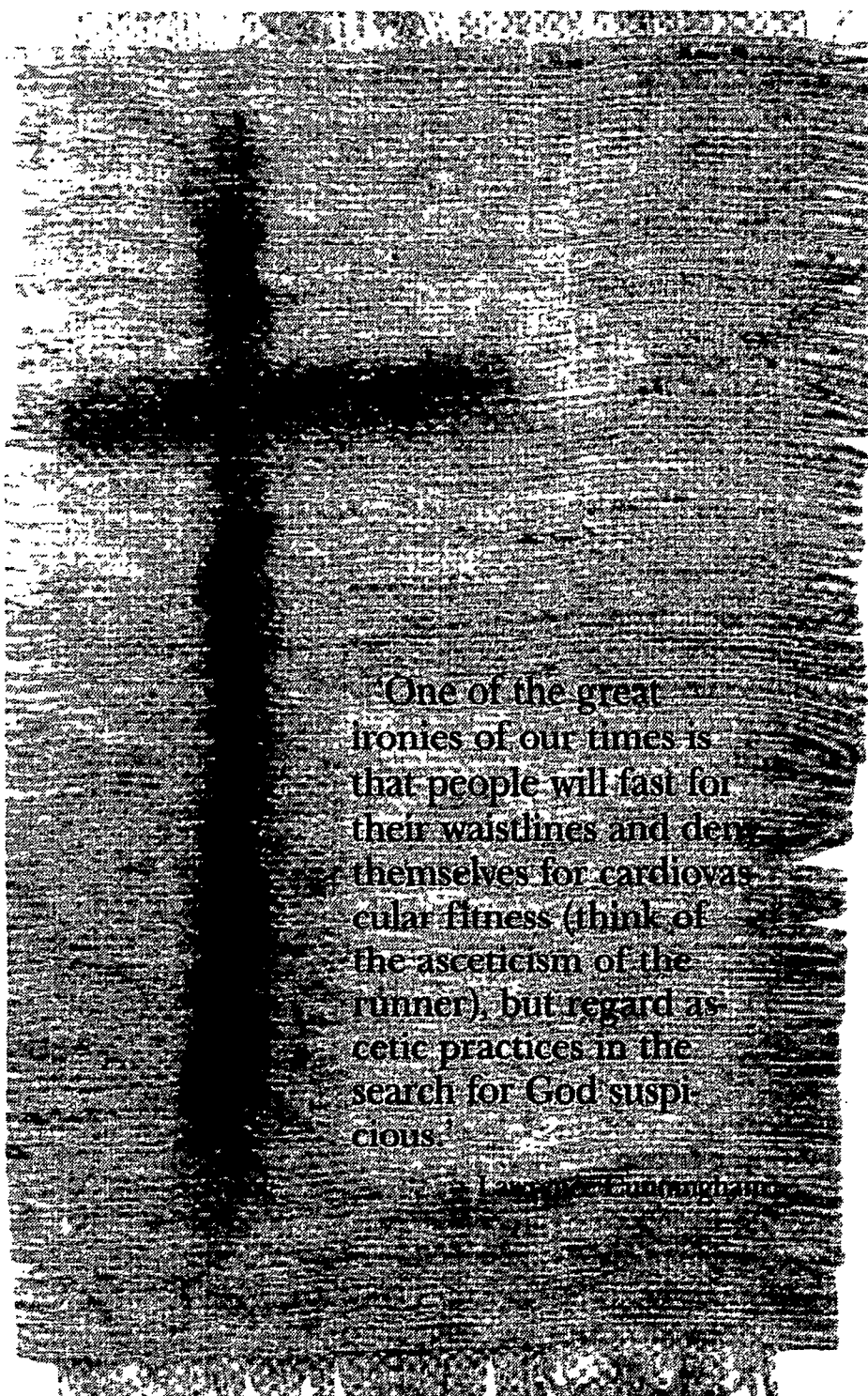
The lives of penitents, holy people and saints abound with stories of men and women who have flogged themselves, fasted, worn "hair shirts" beneath their clothes to cause discomfort, given alms to the poor and the church, put on sackcloth and covered themselves with ashes, and gone on foot on long pilgrimages.

Eventually, the church had to discourage some of the excesses.

At the same time, however, the church required or encouraged some forms of penitential practices for the faithful. Most adults were required to fast on some days and overnight before Mass, and to abstain from meat on Fridays. During Lent, people regularly gave up some activity or food as a sacrifice. Meanwhile, people received the sacrament of penance regularly, often weekly, and faithfully carried out the penances imposed.

The church began to move away from these practices in the mid-20th century. In 1953, for example, Pope Pius XII ended the eucharistic fast from midnight (Catholics are now required to abstain from food and drink for one hour before receiving Communion.)

And in 1966, Pope Paul VI issued the apostolic constitution *Poenitemini*, which



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limited the obligation of abstaining from meat to Ash Wednesday and the Fridays of Lent, and fasting to Ash Wednesday and Good Friday.

However, the bishops of the United States have recommended that Catholics in the United States also practice some form of penitential or spiritual action on Fridays throughout the year.

So while the rules have changed, the church still makes it clear that penitential activities remain vital to faith.

The 1994 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, for example, speaks of the value of penitential acts, noting that they are part of the response to "Christ's call to conversion" (1428).

The catechism goes on to point out that the three ways of expressing penitence most cited by Scriptures and the Church Fathers are fasting, prayer and almsgiving (1434).

And they cited Lent and Fridays as times "particularly appropriate for spiritual exercises, penitential liturgies, pilgrimages as signs of penance, voluntary self-denial such as fasting and almsgiving, and fraternal sharing (charitable and missionary work)" (1438).

"I think we're working with a different notion of penance," acknowledged Sister Winifred Whelen, OSF, a professor of theology at St. Bonaventure University in St. Bonaventure, N.Y. "I think we began to realize that the extreme form of penance and the giving up of things had no meaning for (many) people. People really didn't understand what they were doing."

Sister Whelen explained that the con-

temporary understanding of penance and penitential practices includes three aspects: a psychological one based on the felt need to make up in some way for doing something wrong; a social justice aspect based on the notion of suffering or giving up things to help identify with the suffering people of the world; and a spiritual one focusing on trying to model one's life on Jesus, who suffered and died.

But even in the earlier days, she noted, the intent of these penitential practices was "What do I need to do to make my life better? How can I model my life more after Jesus?"

Imitating Jesus was indeed one of the early motivations of the ascetics for their penitential practices, observed Father Thomas Bokenkotter in his 1985 book, *Essential Catholicism: Dynamics of Faith and Belief*.

Initially, Father Bokenkotter explained, the church had martyrs who were viewed as "heroic Christians who imitated Christ even to sharing in his sacrificial death."

But when the Roman persecutions ended and there were fewer martyrs to serve as heroes, the focus "shifted to those Christians who led lives of extraordinary asceticism and penance. People realized that one could suffer a slow martyrdom by practicing extraordinary austerities: leading a life of perfect chastity, depriving oneself of food and sleep, wearing a hair shirt, scourging oneself, etc."

What ascetics discover, Father Batule observed, is that "in ascetical living, we

freely embrace suffering because of its capacity to bring us in union with the Passion of our crucified Lord Jesus Christ."

This sentiment is echoed in the catechism.

"Penance help configure us to Christ, who alone expiated our sins once for all. They allow us to become co-heirs with the risen Christ ..." (1460).

At the same time, however, church leaders have consistently stressed that penitential practices alone did not make one holy or help to control desires.

Again, the catechism notes, "Jesus' call to conversion and penance, like that of the prophets before him, does not aim first at outward works, 'sackcloth and ashes,' fasting and mortification, but at the conversion of the heart, interior conversion. Without this, such penances remain sterile and false; however, interior conversion urges expression in visible signs, gestures and works of penance."

Since Vatican II, the focus of self-discipline and penitential acts has been on seeking ways to grow, rather than just to deny. Thus, for example, a person could choose to read spiritual works during Lent rather than give up television, Sister Whelen acknowledged.

"Current discussions on spirituality seem more focused on positive experiences than on the self-denying demands of the older asceticism," Cunningham noted. "Furthermore, there have been many outspoken reservations about the older forms of asceticism as antihuman or self-hating or more rooted in Plato, Pythagoras or the Stoics than in the Gospels."

Father Lawrence E. Mick, a priest of the Archdiocese of Cincinnati, contends in "Lent: A Time for What?" in the January 1993 *Today's Parish*, that in focusing on "personal penances in reparation for the crucifixion of Christ" during Lent, Christians were losing sight of the real meaning of Lent as a season of renewal and preparation for Easter.

Rather than giving up things during Lent as a kind of fasting, Father Mick argues, the real focus should be on giving up sin.

"The discipline of Lent is a time to work through the conversion necessary to let go of whatever evil still finds a home in us," Father Mick wrote.

In addition, Sister Whelen observed, Lent was a time to pray for the catechumens, the people preparing for entry into the church at Easter. Thus fellow Christians joined in with the sacrifices being made by the catechumens as a show of support, and gradually the practices of fasting and prayer spread to all Christians during the season.

Father Mick noted that the return of the catechumenate through the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults has helped to restore this notion of penitential acts.

"Prayer, fasting and almsgiving — the traditional Lenten triad — are not seen now as simply means of self-denial and discipline (Lent as spiritual calisthenics), but as undertaken both for the catechumens and for our own baptismal renewal," Father Mick wrote. "We pray and fast and give in order to prepare ourselves to enter again into the death and resurrection of the Lord, experienced first in our baptism and then renewed at every eucharist, but especially in our celebration of the Triduum each year."

Ultimately, penitential acts remain an essential part of Catholic beliefs.

As the catechism notes: "There is no holiness without renunciation and spiritual battle. Spiritual progress entails the asceticism and mortification that gradually lead to living in the peace and joy of the Beatitudes" (2015).

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