

***“THE ONLY GUIDE THAT WILL SERVE YOU WELL TODAY, TOMORROW AND FOREVER IS MERCY.”***

—EMMANUEL CHARLES MCCARTHY

This year, Lent starts one day short of the latest date on which it can begin: Ash Wednesday falls on March 9. Lent is a word derived from the German, *Lenz*, and the Dutch, *lente*, both of which mean *spring*. In the West, Lent is an official part of the liturgical year of the Catholic, Orthodox, Methodist, Lutheran, Anglican, and Presbyterian Churches, and it may be a formal part of the spiritual year of other churches of which I am unaware. Although few Western Christians are aware of the fact, observance of Lent was a point of controversy at the time of the Reformation.

Generally, Lent is considered a time of repentance. The English word “repentance” is a common translation of the Greek word *metanoia*, which literally means “change of mind.” “Change of mind” to what during Lent? To putting on the mind of Christ. Why put on the mind of Christ? Because, if one does not put on the mind of Christ, one will be unable to do Christ-like deeds. One will be unable to obey Jesus' *new commandment* to “*Love one another as I have loved you.*” The CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH says that the “*new commandment*” is the commandment of Jesus that “*contains the entire Law of the Gospel*” (§1970), and that it “*expresses the entire the will of the Father,*” which is to be done on earth as it is in heaven” (§2822).

The unwillingness to struggle to put on and to act out of the mind of Christ results in the Christian or the various institutional Churches calling whatever he or she or their particular social unit designates as the way to live “the Christian way to live.” Lent is the time each year when we are reminded that we must scrape off such spiritual claptrap and get on with the spiritual battle of putting on, ever more completely, the mind of Christ, so that we can be channels of merciful Christic love to a humanity that can be saved from itself and from the wickedness and snares of the satanic by such love—and only by such love.

The moral decision to do the good deed or the evil deed is first made in the mind. We only do moral or immoral acts after we have made a decision in our mind to do so—e.g., to heal the severed ear of a lethal enemy or to cut off his other ear. The hand and the arm do not move themselves; they are moved from the mind. So, as Gandhi observed, “*The mind is **the** spiritual battleground.*” A callous, corrupt, merciless mind produces callous, corrupt, merciless deeds. An empathic, merciful mind produces empathic, merciful deeds. As the mind becomes merciless, it applies—ever more competently and creatively—the logic and technology of mercilessness. As the mind becomes merciful, it applies—ever more competently and creatively—the logic and technology of mercy. As a person or group chooses this or that so a person or group becomes this or that, and this or that becomes their normality. The normal *pre se* is not the standard that Jesus communicates as the will of God. Indeed, the normal can be and often is the diabolical, when viewed with the new mind of Christ.

In the everyday Christian life of most Christians today, Lent is of negligible interest.\*

\*[One remarkable and dramatic exception is Ash Wednesday in the Roman Catholic Church. Far, far more people come to Church on Ash Wednesday than on any other day of the year, including Christmas and Easter. There are great and far-reaching pastoral lessons to be learned from this by bishops and priests in Churches from which Christians have been removing themselves in significant numbers for quite a while.]

Why is this the case? One reason is that the relationship between not eating meat on Fridays or not having ice cream sodas for forty days, and knowing and living the teachings of Jesus and confronting the problems that batter the lives of individuals and haunt the human community is hard to find or fathom in the contemporary Lenten fast. And, since people tend to act according to what they see to be in their own interests, and since fewer and fewer people believe in a God who has to be placated by someone imposing physical pain on himself or herself, Lent, operationally, becomes of negligible interest to most.

Of course, if the fast that God wants was actually the fast that was called for—a fast that was not simply the product of the thoughts of a relative handful of human beings—then such fasting would not be a negligible part of the individual and communal Christian spiritual life: it would be an essential part. If the fast that God wants was truly undertaken in order to move one’s mind and will to conformity with the very mind and will of the Eternal God, then treating such a fast as of negligible interest or importance would be irrational. Furthermore, if the fast that God wants was self-evidently directed toward making a person more of a human being, more fully alive, more reflective of the true God's image and likeness, then simple sanity would attract a person to that fast. And finally, if there were a fast that God wants, that was experienced as a genuine step in the Way to Eternal Life for oneself and for all people, would anything keep a sane person from wholeheartedly desiring to so fast?

So, the question becomes “Is there a fast that God wants?” “Is there a fast that God wants that intrinsically contains within it the promises described above?”

**Consider Isaiah 58:1–12:**

*1 Cry out full-throated and unsparingly, lift up your voice like a trumpet blast; Tell my people their wickedness, and the house of Jacob their sins.*

*2 They seek me day after day, and desire to know my ways, Like a nation that has done what is righteous and not abandoned the law of their God; They ask me to declare what is due them, pleased to gain access to God.*

*3 “Why do we fast, and you do not see it, LORD? Afflict ourselves, and you take no note of it?”*

*Lo, on your fast day you carry out your own pursuits, and drive all your laborers.*

*4 Yes, you fast quarreling and fighting, striking with wicked claw. Would that today you might fast so as to make your voice heard on high!*

*5 Is this the manner of fasting I wish, for keeping a day of penance: That a man bow his head like a reed, and lie in sackcloth and ashes? Do you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD?*

*6 **This, rather, is the fasting that I wish:** releasing those bound unjustly, untying the thongs of the yoke; Setting free the oppressed, breaking every yoke;*

*7 Sharing your bread with the hungry, sheltering the oppressed and the homeless; Clothing the naked when you see them, and not turning your back on your own.*

*8 Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your wound shall quickly be healed; Your vindication shall go before you, and the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.*

*9 Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer, you shall cry for help, and he will say: "Here I am!" If you remove from your midst oppression, false accusation and malicious speech;*

*10 If you bestow your bread on the hungry and satisfy the afflicted; Then light shall rise for you in the darkness, and the gloom shall become for you like midday;*

*11 Then the LORD will guide you always and give you plenty even on the parched land. He will renew your strength, and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring whose water never fails.*

*12 The ancient ruins shall be rebuilt for your sake, and the foundations from ages past you shall raise up; "Repairer of the breach," they shall call you, "Restorer of ruined homes."*

Jesus conversion command, *"I want mercy, not sacrifice"* (Mt 9-13) and His teaching regarding the standard of judgment at the end of time, *"I was hungry and you gave me to eat ..."* (Mt 25: 31-46) are restatements of Isaiah 58:1-12 with the added authority of the Messiah, God incarnate and eternal significance attached to it. But what else could Jesus proclaim as the Self revelation of God if, as John Paul II states in his 1981 encyclical RICH IN MERCY, that *"mercy is the supreme attribute of the Creator and the Redeemer."* An act of mercy is an act of loyalty to God. An act of mercy is an act of fidelity to Jesus.

However, since every moral act begins in the mind, and since a great deal of our time has been spent becoming who we were not created to be, the first and indispensable step to becoming who we were created to be, is *metanoia*, change of mind. The attached, PRAYER TO LIVE MERCIFULLY, may serve as a way to begin to fast as God wants us to fast this Lent—so that we may live as God wants us to live this Lent and beyond. If prayed with perseverance, with a sincere desire that God transform one and one's Christian community—if it should be prayed as a Lenten communal prayer—God promises that one's voice "will be heard on high." And, God is faithful to His promises.

Every day, in the Byzantine Divine Liturgy (Eucharist), the priest or deacon chants “*That the rest of our life maybe spent in peace and repentance, let us ask the Lord.*” The community chants in response “*Grant this, O Lord.*” Lent, therefore, is the moment when we can initiate the process of life-long *metanoia*, putting on the mind of Christ, by entering into the fast God wants. At the end of the forty days’ fast, we can then start to “*spend the rest of our lives in peace and repentance,*” thereby further extending the breadth and length and depth of what we have freely begun, namely, to live the asceticism God desires us to live—the asceticism of nonviolent, merciful Christ-like merciful love towards all always, whether they be friends or enemies.

The “Prayer to Live Mercifully” could equivalently be called the “Prayer to Fast and Live as God Wants Us to Fast and Live” or the “Prayer for the Grace to Rehabilitate Our Minds as God Wants Us to Rehabilitate Our Minds.” Prayer is the avenue through which we open ourselves to the Self-communication of God, sometimes called the grace of God. This Self-communication enlightens our minds, so that we may know that God is our Father who is “rich in mercy.” It is also a conduit of the power that strengthens our wills so that we may choose, in our thoughts, words, and deeds, to be incarnations of that Divine Mercy. In other words, authentic Christian prayer is a first step to becoming merciful little Christs and ceasing to be merciless little Caesar in the place and time allotted to us by God; God, whose supreme attribute as Creator and Redeemer, is mercy. To paraphrase the *staretz*, Fr. Zozzima, in Dostoyevsky’s *THE BROTHERS KARAMAZOV*:

*Pray to be a person of merciful love as Jesus was a person of merciful love. And perhaps one day you will do a little deed of Christ-like mercy, and then perhaps another and another. In those merciful moments the face of the earth will be renewed, where you and only you can renew it—and as God wants it renewed.*

There may be more to do with a human life than be merciful as the Heavenly Father of all is merciful, and as the One who is one with the Father is merciful. But, there is nothing more important or significant to do for God, for humanity, or for oneself. Pondering Isaiah 58:1–12 and praying to live mercifully could make this Lent a first and/or a big step along the highway of repentance, guided by *the only guide that will serve you well today, tomorrow, and forever: “Blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy.”*

## **Prayer To Live Mercifully**

*O God,  
Teach me  
Not to envy,  
to hate,  
to justify,  
to imitate,  
to support,  
to ennoble,  
or to kill for,  
Those who take the food from the table of others and then teach contentment,*

*Those for whom the taxes are destined, who demand sacrifice,  
Those who eat their fill, who speak to the hungry of good times to come,  
Those who lead humanity into the abyss, calling*

*Hate, love,  
Unfaithfulness, faithfulness,  
Lies, truth,  
Slavery, freedom,  
Too much, not enough,  
Homicide, heroism,  
Evil, good.*

*And, O God,*

*Teach me*

*when I have food, to remember the hungry;  
when I have work, to remember the jobless;  
when I have a home, to remember the homeless;  
when I am free, to remember the imprisoned,  
when I am without pain, to remember the suffering,  
when I am loved, to remember the unloved,  
when I am living, to remember the dying,  
when I am dead, to remember the living.  
And remembering, help me to destroy  
my complacency; bestir my compassion, and thereby  
spend my time and my eternity  
doing good upon earth, helping  
by word and deed, by prayer and sacrifice of self  
those who cry out  
for what I take for granted.  
Amen.*