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A LENTEN ASSIGNMENT

When Lent begins on Ash Wednesday, St. Paul asserts, "We are ambassadors for Christ...God as it were appealing through us." Do we consider what it means that the Almighty would actually make such an appeal? "We implore you in Christ's name: be reconciled to God!" Here we have our task for Lent. By God's gift of grace we have been made members of God's family, transformed through faith. What the Apostle urges is deeper conformity with the divine nature imparted to us. We are called to "become the very holiness of God." This is a goal far beyond what we ourselves can do, but "with God all things are possible" (Mk 10:27). "As your fellow workers, we beg you not to receive the grace of God in vain," St. Paul admonishes us (2 Co 5:20,21; 6:1).

We are favored children of the Lord of heaven and earth, but we do not take our claim to our inheritance for granted. We recognize in the apostle's words that we are called to an ever more profound reconciliation with God. This means we should consider what we need to do in order to exercise greater virtue. We look at our faults not to dwell morosely on them, but to recognize that we are summoned to deal with them, knowing help is always available.

At no point in our earthly advance do we decide, "This is enough. God should be satisfied with me where I am." The One Who is always giving more to us is also asking more of us. Not that the generous Giver needs anything from our frugal bounty. The divine summons is for our sake, that we may move forward in goodness and at the same time, be recipients of a more copious outpouring from heaven.

The third century St. Theognostos of Alexandria advises, "Since salvation comes to you as a free gift, give thanks to God your Savior. If you wish to present Him with gifts, gratefully offer two tiny coins, humility and love, and God will accept these in the treasury of His salvation" (*The Philokalia*, Vol II, p.369, Faber and Faber edition).

The weeks of Lent urge us to look at ourselves and assess our particular need for a Savior. We live in a "feel good" age where we are told to affirm our positive qualities. Not bad advice, but to balance it, we have to weigh what in us requires improvement. We have received a wounded humanity and we experience that woundedness on many levels of our being. Though we are all sinners to some extent, we have a Redeemer to rescue us.

St. Theognostos explains, "We will not be condemned because we have sinned, since we were given a mutable and unstable nature." He adds, "We have been given the power to repent, as well as the time in which to do so. Only through repentance shall we receive God's mercy.... Not that God is angry with us. He is angry with evil" (p. 369,370). No, God is not angry with us. He wants to release us from the bondage of all that can deceive us.

Humility and love are the coins we offer to God. In exchange, the abundance of divine forgiveness purifies us and raises us to a new level of existence. At that level,

we look more closely at where we are and in gratitude, ask Jesus to reveal what we should undertake as our next step in striving to be better. It is easy to turn aside from our failings, to excuse them and erase any personal blame for them. Our faults require some careful examination. Have I been deaf to what has been pointed out to me about myself? Blind to what is in front of me? "You who are deaf, listen. You who are blind look and see" (Is 42: 18). We are probably only somewhat deaf and somewhat blind to our failings. But Jesus wants to open our ears and eyes to a fuller understanding of where we are at this moment in time. He asks us to make progress during our Lenten days, to embrace more fully the life He came to this world to give us.

Love and humility are coins that rub warmly together. With their help, let's focus on a particular fault, especially one that bothers others. We'll make it an assignment for the Lent of 2004. It won't be eliminated completely. The inclination may remain for a long, long time. We ask our Savior to show us where we especially need His saving help.

"I will lead the blind on their journey. By paths unknown I will guide them. I will turn darkness into light before them and make crooked ways straight. These things I will do for them" (Is 42:16).

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