

Pray More Lenten Retreat - Transcript

For God So Loved the World

Fr. Thomas Quinn

Hello friends. My name is Father Tom Quinn, and I'm a priest of the archdiocese of Newark in Northeastern New Jersey. I'm stationed at a parish called St. Michael's, which is in the town of Cranford, and I'm very happy to be with you on this Pray More Lenten Retreat, to be one of your presenters, but also, hopefully, one who journeys with you through this retreat, that together we might pray for each other, that together we might allow the Lord to speak to the inmost recesses of our hearts, right in a new way, to receive a new gift of His grace, and to allow Him to bring us into an ever more fruitful discipleship with Himself.

And so, for this purpose, let us begin our time together now with prayer by entrusting ourselves to Our Lady and her powerful intercession. *In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Hail Mary, full of Grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, Pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

So, as we begin, I think we might do well to ask ourselves, you know, one question: "How has my Lent been?" And here we are, it's the fourth week of Lent, right, this Laetare Sunday. And looking back now, over the past few weeks, we might do well to ask ourselves, right: "How has Lent been for me. Has there been spiritual fruit throughout this season? Have I been faithful to my Lenten resolutions?" You know, if you're anything like me, you will see a mixed bag of results. You will see areas where you have been faithful to the inspirations of the Lord's grace and to the action of the Holy Spirit, and you'll see areas where, perhaps, you haven't been so faithful to the resolutions and to the various disciplines that you intended to undertake during this Lenten season.

But perhaps even if you've kept everything perfectly through God's grace, you know, that's a beautiful thing. But either way, I think for all of us, I want to refocus our disposition to adjust our Lenten disposition just slightly. Because I think for many of us, you know, as Ash Wednesday comes around each year, that preeminent question, right, you know, "What are you going to give up for Lent?" Is so prevalent. And so I think the danger in that is I think that our Lenten focus can become too much a test of our own endurance, a test of our own resolve, than in the disposition of receiving, a disposition of allowing God to free us and to give

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us the gift, most abundantly, of His mercy. Lent can become too much of a test, right.

There is a, you know, as a kid, there was a show on TV called *American Gladiators*, and it was a show of various obstacle courses where the contestants would have to battle it out for the win. Well, one of these obstacle courses was called the gauntlet, and I think for too many of us Lent becomes the gauntlet, it becomes this test of resolve and endurance more than anything else. Now, certainly, you know, sacrifice is an important part of the spiritual life, right. Prayer and sacrifice are a couple of the most fundamental pillars of this spiritual life. So we can discount sacrifice, right, because sacrifice helps to give us a freer heart, right, freeing us from all of our little disordered attachments, it makes more room in our hearts for the sanctifying action of the Holy Spirit. So we can't discount sacrifice, it's an important thing.

You know, last year I gave up coffee and tea for Lent, and I'm a huge coffee drinker, I'm a huge tea drinker. But at the beginning of the season, a friend of mine came back from a business trip from Chicago, and while he was there he went to a place called intelligentsia Coffee. Perhaps some of you watching are familiar with the business. I think it's sort of a haven for coffee snobs like myself in the greater Chicagoland area. But he brought me back this bag of coffee, and of course, it being Lent, he didn't know I gave up coffee for Lent, but I couldn't do anything with it, right, you know. So what did I do? I brought it back to the rectory, I put it on the kitchen counter, and there it sat for weeks, for days, all throughout the season of Lent it just sat there.

And each time I passed through the kitchen in the rectory, it mocked me. It just sat there and it mocked me, because I knew I couldn't drink it, and it drove me crazy, right. I was squirming, I was uncomfortable, right, but that was a good squirming, it was a good uncomfortableness, right, because it allowed God to help give me a freer heart in that sacrifice. It gave me a more open heart to receive the gift of God's divine life, which He wishes so much to give to all of us. Isn't it amazing how even such little things can hold such sway, right, over our hearts, and over our affections. You know, such really, in the grand scheme of things, such trivialities can hold such control and such influence over our affections, right. But God wants to give us free hearts, right, and sacrifice is an important part in that.

So we don't want to discount sacrifice. But as we adjust our Lenten focus a little bit, we want to focus on another aspect of that. And for that, another story. During my second year at the seminary, I became friendly with an Eastern Catholic priest by the name of Father Phillip chk. Once a week, my classmates and I would make a visit to a place called Saint Joseph's Home for the Elderly, which is run by The

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Little Sisters of the Poor. And among the residents was this retired Eastern Catholic priest, a Melkite Catholic priest named Father Phillip chk. And while there, you know, we became friendly. And as time went on, I began to visit him even outside of our scheduled visits from the seminary. I'd go and visit him and, you know, we talked about many things.

But one year, during the season of Lent, we began to talk about the differences between Eastern practices with Lent and the Western church's practices with Lent. And, as you know, for us Lent begins on Ash Wednesday with the marking, the customary marking with ashes, right, on our foreheads, right. Ashes, that ancient symbol of repentance and of conversion of heart, right, of coming back to the Lord with remorse for our sins, right. But Father Phil would tell me, you know, for Eastern Christians, Lent doesn't begin on Ash Wednesday, it begins the Monday prior. And really, the Sunday Evening prior, with the celebration of what's called forgiveness vespers. And he would tell me, you know, that Eastern Christians don't receive ashes for Lent, but he would tell me that the priest would anoint them, the priests would anoint the people with oil. Oil, another ancient symbol that comes down to us through the centuries, right, that symbol of healing.

And the difference between the 2 struck me, and I really marveled at the beauty of the Eastern practice of anointing with oil, right. That, as Lent is beginning, the disposition isn't necessarily one of entering the gauntlet, but it's one of receiving the gift of the Lord's healing. It's one of receiving the gift of the Lord's mercy. And I couldn't help but think to myself how beautiful, right. This certainly doesn't discount the reality of sacrifice, and certainly, if you're familiar with Eastern discipline, you know that their fasting regulations throughout the season of Lent is quite stringent, that it's quite severe compared especially with the Western practice. But the disposition to enter into Lent with this disposition of receiving, of one of seeking out the Lord's merciful and healing touch, how beautiful. So I think that's good for us, right. Here we are, halfway through Lent, let us maybe shift our disposition a little bit. One that takes into account also the things that God wants to give us His healing for.

So we'd do well to ask ourselves another question, right. "Where do I need the gift of the Lord's healing touch? Where in my life do I need the gift of the Lord's mercy? Where do I need Him to make me whole?" I think to allow the Lord to answer this question for us, we needn't look further than the gospel passage for this fourth Sunday of Lent. And that dynamic of encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus. It's so crucial, isn't it, right? The encounter. The encounter between Christ and the individual. We see this all throughout the gospels, right, and they're some of the most beautiful passages. They're passages that I personally like to call, for myself, I call them irresistible. There is just something irresistible about those

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passages, a certain quality about them that draws you right in, that draws you right in into that intimate encounter between Christ and the person, right.

And we see this, again, throughout the gospels in many locations, right. We see this in the encounter between Christ and Bartimaeus, right, the blind man, right. Jesus is passing by on the road, and Bartimaeus is calling out really with all of his heart “Jesus, Son of David, have pity on me.” Right. And the people are telling him, right, to be quiet, they’re hushing him, right, to leave Jesus alone. But Jesus hears him, doesn’t He, and Jesus leaves the crowd, goes over to Bartimaeus. And the passage is so well-known to us. *What do you want me to do for you?* And Bartimaeus’s heartfelt reply, *Lord, that I may see.* Jesus gives him the gift of his sight back, He heals him from that infirmity.

And then I think, really, the most beautiful aspect about that encounter, right, because we have to imagine, when Bartimaeus received his sight back, what was the first thing he saw? Well, the first thing he probably saw was the face of Christ, you know. Was the face of our Lord, looking upon Him, looking upon Him in love. How beautiful, right, and how irresistible that is for you and for me, that intimate encounter with Christ, right. That’s what we are called to, we’re called to enter into that intimacy, those moments of that face-to-face encounter with Christ. And we see this elsewhere in the gospels too, right? We see this in the healing of another man, right, of another man born blind, right, as Jesus enters Bethsaida, right. Some people bring to Him a man born blind, and what does Jesus do? Does He heal him on the spot? No, right. What does Mark tell us in that gospel? That Jesus led the man out of the village, He leads him away from the crowd, and again, that intimate encounter, face-to-face with Christ, one-on-one, Jesus heals him, restores him.

We see this again, right, when Jesus is passing through The Decapolis on His way to the Sea of Galilee, some people come out and bring to Him a man who has a speech impediment, and who is deaf. Does Jesus heal him on the spot then? No. Again, He brings that man away from the crowd, right, and the passage is so well-known to us, isn’t it? That Jesus spits, right, and He touches that man’s tongue, He puts his fingers in the man’s ears, right, and He says “Ephphatha”. “Be opened.”

When we come before the Lord face-to-face, when we come before Him in the intimacy of the encounter, in prayer, our minds and our hearts are opened, and we can receive His healing touch. Even in our gospel today with Nicodemus, we see this dynamic. It’s a little different, right, because Nicodemus doesn’t need Christ’s physical healing, but he needs His healing nonetheless, right. John gives us that little detail in the gospel, that Nicodemus came to Jesus by night, right, the symbolic gesture, that Nicodemus was still laboring in the darkness in some way, right. He acknowledged certainly that Jesus came from God, right. He said “We

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know that You are a man sent by God. How else could You have done all of these miraculous signs? How else could You have done all of these great miracles? So we know You come from God.” But nonetheless, Nicodemus was still laboring in the dark a little bit, right. He still needed to come to the light. He still needed the clarity of Christ’s teaching. He still needed to come to the light of true faith, and move away from the darkness.

We’ll finish up our time together now, but first, I’m going to give you some homework, if I may. And the first part of the assignment is, if you haven’t done so already, or if you don’t already have a habit of it, go to confession. Go to confession and make a good one. Get yourself a good examination of conscience, and go receive the gift of the Lord’s healing and His mercy through the sacrament of reconciliation, right. Perhaps this is something that might fill you with some trepidation. But take it from me, any sense of anxiety, any sense of embarrassment or shame is outweighed by the gift of the Lord’s healing. By the peace and the consolation that the sacrament brings.

I say this not only as a priest, but I say this as a penitent myself, right. Because priests can’t absolve ourselves, right. I can’t take out my phone, or look in the mirror, you know, reverse the camera on my phone and say “Oh, well, hey Father Tom, I absolve you from your sins.” Right. No, I have to go to confession, I have to go to confession myself. And so I say this to you as a penitent myself, right, the peace and the freedom that the sacrament brings outweighs any shame, any embarrassment, any anxiety, right. And the priest is there to help you, right. He’s not there to make you feel bad, he’s there to help you through this, right. So be brave, be bold, be courageous in loving Christ in this way, right. Go to confession. Go make a good, good confession. You know, especially if it’s been a long time.

And the second part of the assignment I’m going to give you is to make time in your day-to-day life for prayer, for that intimate encounter with Christ, right. To come before Him, face-to-face, allowing the light of His face to shine upon you. And for that, I think we’d do well to take into account maybe this little acronym. EAR, right. EAR. So all of you who have them, listen up, right. EAR. Encounter, that first E, to encounter. We have to come before the Lord, right, we have to make the time for prayer, we have to come before Him, to encounter Him, right. So E, Encounter. A is Acknowledge. When we come before the Lord, we need to acknowledge, right. Acknowledge what’s going on in our hearts, in our lives, right bring before Him all of that stuff, right. Spill our guts before Him, to acknowledge, to acknowledge what’s going on in our hearts. And finally, the R. To receive, right. After we’ve spilled our guts, then we need to zip our mouths and to receive, to listen for the Lord’s voice, to have an open heart, to receive the gift of the Lord’s

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light, and His consolation, and His inspiration as well. So EAR. Encounter, Acknowledge, and Receive.

So that's the second part of your assignment, right. First part, go to confession. And the second part, if you're not doing so already, make time in your daily life for prayer, right. There is nothing that replaces that, there's no substitute for that, for the work of prayer. We need to do it. But even in that, to rely on the Lord's grace for that as well. As we end our time together, you'll see beside me a statue of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. And so as we end our time together, let us ask Him to take us into the abode of His heart, the abode of His love and His mercy. And we'll pray together now the prayer to the Sacred Heart by John Henry Cardinal Newman.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Most sacred, most loving Heart of Jesus, You are concealed in the Holy Eucharist, and You beat for us still. Now as then You say, "With desire I have desired." I worship You with all my best love and awe, with fervent affection, with my most subdued, most resolved will. For a while You take up Your abode within me. O make my heart beat with Your Heart! Purify it of all that is earthly, all that is proud and sensual, all that is hard and cruel, of all perversity, of all disorder, of all deadness. So fill it with You, that neither the events of the day, nor the circumstances of the time, may have the power to ruffle it; but that in Your love and Your fear, it may have peace. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.