

## Pray More Lenten Retreat - Transcript

### **Jesus is Doing Something New: "Go and sin no more"**

**Fr. John Burns**

Hey everyone. I'm Father John Burns, and I am delighted to be back with you as we make this journey toward Easter, now on the fifth Sunday of Lent. Let's begin with a prayer, and then we'll reflect.

*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Loving Father, our hearts are open to You. This season calls us to look deep within, to ask serious questions about our lives, our direction, our hearts. We ask You for the grace of encouragement wherever we have found discouragement, where we have experienced our own failings, our own weakness, where the temptation has been intimidating or too much for us. Stir in us, Lord, the fire of love, the deep fire of Your gift infused into us by the gift of our baptism. Reclaim our hearts. Reestablish Your holy dwelling in us this rich, rich season of Lent. We You ask in a particular way to inspire us in this moment. That through our reflection on this fifth Sunday of Lent we would be ever more richly committed to the fullness of life that You hold out to us in the way of Jesus Christ. We ask all of this through Christ, our Lord. Amen. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

Here we are. We are in the fifth week now of Lent. I spoke a couple of weeks ago to you about conversion, metanoia, that change of mind. And something that's very humbling to us is the fact that, as I said in the first week, we need to do this over and over again. That we continuously need Lent precisely because we're never fully living the joy of Easter. That we always end up stumbling back into the world and forgetting about God, failing in our healthy fear of Him, forgetting the gifts that He offers to us, and the need that we would sit in deep gratitude before all of that that we would not forget God.

Now, in the midst of however that's discouraging, we remember our story, and hopefully you've had some time to go back and read some of those books of the Old Testament, or at least to read summaries of them, wherein we discover more and more that we've been acting like this since the beginning. That we've always been in need of the rescuer and the grace of God, which is why Jesus Christ Himself had to come in the flesh, because we wouldn't get ourselves out of the hole that we dug. That conversion is an initial experience, when we first turn toward the Lord, and yet having turned to the Lord we continue to fall. And so we need to convert again, to repent again, to return to the Lord over and over.

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Now, something that's very beautiful about that, despite its being discouraging, is to think about the reality that our lives are situated within a story. The story of us. Our families, our friendships, our communities, we are in the middle of an unfolding story. And so when we need repentance and conversion, it means that we've fallen away, and when we've fallen away, it means we've done something or some things. We've chosen a way of life that is inconsistent with the life of Jesus Christ. Sometimes we've fallen away in a pattern that's regular for us, other times in a way that's surprising to us, and both of those are very important.

If we're repeating old patterns, then we know that this is a lifelong struggling that we're engaged in, and there's a particular type of grace we seek, as well as a practical implication of the virtuous application of those gifts. If it's something new and surprising, we learn something from that as well, which is really that we're always capable of serious sin. That even if we might feel like life is on track, we can be surprised in a moment that, as some desire overwhelms us, we would do something crazy, and turn away from God and choose something far less than Him.

We had a priest in seminary who used to say to us "Gentlemen, remember that you can always commit the greatest sin, whatever your greatest sin might be, and you can commit it today before dinner." His point was just that serious sin is always at the doorstep. It's not like we need to set about planning something for weeks and months before we could do something utterly destructive. We live on the very threshold of sin and death at all times, which is why we continuously return to the Lord. That when we do fall, we seek reconciliation, in particular through the sacrament. But we also, in the midst of our story, resolve more firmly to endure better, accepting God's grace and applying the virtues, to endure better the temptations that fall before us.

So as we learn from these things and we continue to grapple with our own sinfulness, discouraged as we are that we still need repentance and conversion, frustrated that we thought we were further than this and we aren't, we also recognize the beauty of grace, its richness, and its depth, and its splendor. You see, because each fall and return, every conversion, in particular through the sacrament of reconciliation, every return to the Lord is a new infusion of grace. And every time we receive grace, it is God's gift, His help to us poured into our hearts in the context of what and who and how our hearts are.

So each time that we receive God's gift, we're a little bit different. That we have behind us some more circumstances than the last time. That if we are striving to be more deeply converted to God this Lent, the places we are opening our lives to Him more fully are disposed to receive His gift and to be transformed by that gift in a way that makes us new. Because what God's grace does is make things new. It

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surprises us. That even if we might have stumbled in the same way we've fallen a thousand times, each time we encounter God's gift of reconciliation, we encounter God Himself. And God Himself is always coming to us in the context of our present need to rescue us.

Every receipt of grace, every conversion is actually something new. We hear this in a certain way, in an archetypal way, in the first reading from this weekend's mass. The prophet Isaiah, we're in chapter 43. The Lord again, as He does all through the prophets, tells us about how He acts toward us, about what He does, about His habits and patterns of intervening when we are in need. And very beautifully this weekend, He speaks again about the desert, the wasteland, the places where we were parched, and He says wonderfully "I am doing something new."

Now, when God acts and gets involved in our lives, when He intervenes, when He calls us back to Himself, it's always something new. Even if confession, or your own decision in your own heart to move more seriously into the practice of our faith, even if that seems very static and stable, and maybe repetitive, and maybe always the same, it's not, because your heart is always growing and changing. And so as God meets you in the context of the recent events that led to that fall, He reaches in and does something slightly different, because your heart is slightly different.

***"Behold, I am doing something new. In the desert, I make a way. In the wasteland, rivers. Wild beasts honor Me, jackals and ostriches, for I put water in the desert and rivers in the wasteland. Behold, I am doing something new."***

Anywhere and everywhere that you might have felt discouraged this Lent, that is a word for you, and it is a word that has to sink deep for you to recognize that, as the Lord comes to you, He has a new set of gifts and graces. It's the same pattern of reconciliation, but it touches you anew.

Now, on the topic of discouragement, this weekend we have for us... the Lord places before us a profound image of sinfulness and fallenness that can be quite discouraging for the one who finds themselves in that place. We have in the gospel the adulteress woman, the woman caught in the very act of adultery, the scripture tells us, who is dragged before Jesus and accused by these scholars of the law, the Scribes and the Pharisees who are asking whether or not they need to stone her, according to the law. And you probably prayed with that already, I hope that you will, but I would just propose to you in this time of reflection that we find ourselves in the place of this adulterous woman. And what I mean by that is that even if the sin of adultery has never touched our lives, we actually are just like her, in that we have turned away from the way and chosen something fallen.

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Back to our story, and the story of the Old Testament. When you go back and read through, the language of God toward His people is always a spousal language. That God always address Israel as His bride, as His chosen one, as His beloved, and that God speaks as a bridegroom. And over and over again, as Israel wanders off in the desert, turns to false Gods, worships riches or worships the Gods of other nations, turning away from the commandments of God, every time that's happening, the Lord uses the language of adultery, of infidelity, precisely because our relationship with God is so profound and so intimate that spousal language actually fits it best.

And so when we sin against God, when we choose the world, when we turn to false gods, we worship idols. And worshipping an idol, whether it might be money, or sex, or honor, or power, whatever is dominating our pursuit of goods, when we turn to these things we're choosing something else as our number one, which is actually the way of idolatry. And idolatry in biblical terms is adulterous. And so, as we walk this journey of Lent, and we come before our own sinfulness, we find ourselves in the place of the adulterous woman who has discovered, and been discovered, in the midst of deep sin.

And it hurts the heart of the Lord, it violates the law, it carries all kinds of implications, and yet in that place the Lord is encouraging. When we come before the Lord in our sinfulness and we acknowledge the thousands of ways that we have wandered off - and we have to do this, and regularly, and especially during Lent - we find ourselves at His feet crumpled, sometimes beneath the weight of our sin, sometimes bruised, having been dragged out of our own sinfulness in the dust sitting before the Lord, saying "Lord, I am lost. I can't believe it's come to this. How did I get here?"

Israel herself, as the adulterous woman, over and over again found herself right there, as do we whenever we're trapped deeply in our sin. And it is the Lord, the rescuer, who comes out to us and says "I call you back to Myself." Seeing the adulterous woman, He does not exercise strict justice. Justice, actually giving what is deserved, would have brought her to death. By the law, she could have been stoned. And even, we might say, by the law she should have been stoned, according to a very particular and specific and not exaggerated way of reading the old law. But Jesus is doing something new. You see, He's not doing what we would expect. He's not even acting on the level of justice here, but rather surpassing it. He's doing something new.

He's coming into a desert place, a place of idolatry and dryness, a parched land, and He is bringing a river, which brings life and flourishing and fullness. He does not hold against her the death that she has invoked rightly by her sin. Rather, He surpasses the justice, which would entail punishment, and He does something

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more, something new. He forgives her sins, which is a marvel of God's mercy and goodness to us. That we deserve the weight of punishment, that all of the ways that we can catalog our ingratitude, our forgetfulness, all of the things that we've hopefully been thinking about all through this Lent, we put that in front of the Lord and what do we deserve? We deserve to perish. But we hear Him say "Repent. Repent and be saved." And we see in ourselves, as we sit with the adulterous woman, the fact that He does not hold our sin against us when we repent, provided we recognize that sin and we renounce it.

It's not a free pass. It's not like "You confessed your sin, now go and don't worry about it for the rest of your life." He says to her "Go and sin no more." The gift of His mercy, His not holding against us the punishment we deserve, His not acting on strict justice terms comes with a condition: that we will sin no more. Now, of course we know that that's very difficult to enact. That to be perfect, as our Heavenly Father is perfect, which is an invitation of the gospels, requires the gift of grace, because we cannot do it on our own.

But, encouraged by the Lord's forgiveness in this Lenten season, especially through the gift, the beautiful gift of the sacrament of penance and reconciliation, we are encouraged by the Lord's patience, and we discover and recognize again and again that kindness that we heard in the Psalm two weeks ago - that gentleness, that healing, that mercy, that compassion - and we allow that to wash over us so that, keenly and realistically aware of our own brokenness and fallenness, we are also aware that when we fear God in healthy respect, that when we repent and when we remember His gifts and graces, the blessings He gives to us, that He calls us back to Himself. He does not hold that against us. He frees us from our sin. "From now on go and sin no more."

I want to conclude with the ultimate, the most important, the final. Because in-between these 2 readings - God telling us He's doing something new and then showing us what that new is, which is forgiving the idolatry and the adultery and the deep sinfulness of our own hearts - in-between them is this second reading, where Paul himself really explains to us that the purpose of Lent, as he writes to the Philippians, that all of the work of Lent, our side of cooperating with God's gifts of grace, all of this is ordered toward our recognition of the supreme need we have for God. And that as long as we live outside of the logic of grace, we're always going to be confused.

We're not going to have a way to organize our choices, to make discernments, to decide what's most important, what's next important, and what follows from that. We're not going to have a criterion for decision-making, because we're going to be on our own. We're going to be in the world and of the world, and the world is

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always confused, because it is a way of not worshiping the Lord, it is a way of choosing the self over the other, it is a way of turning in instead of outward. And Lent is designed to break all of that

Paul specifically puts before us the point of that breaking, the point of that acknowledgement of our mortality, the point of our facing our sinfulness and grappling with the temptation that has probably been chasing us our whole lives. He points us toward the ultimate. He says “I consider everything as loss,” everything being the world, everything being his own accomplishments, the career he had before, the way he was living, everything is loss, meaning “I let that all go, it passes away. I do not hold onto it anymore because of the supreme good of knowing Jesus Christ, my Lord. The supreme good of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord.”

That is so essential to the way that we reorder our lives, because, you see, when we go about every day, we’re pursuing goods. You know, we go to work and we try to do a good job, and we fulfill the tasks of the day in order to earn a salary to provide for our families, to pay the mortgage. When we put a meal on the table, we’re putting something in front of us and those we’re eating with that’s supposed to nourish them. We’re trying to do a good... we eat the food striving for the good of health, the good of flourishing. We’re always pursuing goods.

The heart of sinfulness is getting mixed up about what the goods are. Sometimes we think things are good, and they’re attractive to us, but they aren’t actually goods, at least not right now. When we get mixed up about all of that, we also get mixed up about what is the greatest good. That of all of the goods of life that we pursue, and discern, and strive to know better through the life of virtue, there’s only one good that stands above all of the others and it is supreme, and it’s knowing Jesus Christ.

The end of this reading he says something really beautiful: “I continue my pursuit toward the goal, the prize of God’s upward calling, in Christ Jesus.” Friends, that’s at the heart of what this is really supposed to amount to. That Lent is a season of conversion, which is a turning from the world and back to God. It is an upward calling toward the supreme good that we either forgot or failed to recognize was as good as it really is. We recognize again and again, we discover, we taste anew the goodness of God, the supreme goodness of God and Jesus Christ every time we convert, we repent, we turn away. Every time we receive forgiveness, reconciliation, we taste the sweetest of God. Something new is done for us, and we discover indeed that this is the supreme good. That it’s not worth trading this for the world and all the things that we pursue, many of which are totally justifiably good. But none of them can replace the supreme good, because with us all of the

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world is ashes. It is passing away. And the day will come when we stand before God with nothing to show but the way we have ordered our lives.

Our lives have been ordered around the supreme good of knowing Jesus Christ. This upward calling, the pursuit of the ultimate goal, the prize of God's upward calling in Christ Jesus, that prize is heaven. The evil one stands to tempt us in every way that he can to turn away from that and get trapped in an idolatrous, adulterous, and worldly way. But we have one who's gone before us, who has conquered every temptation, who has made a new way, who has sought us out to rescue us, and in this moment, as we make this retreat, is longing that you would return to Him and return to Him with your whole heart.

If you have not done so already during this season of Lent, formalize that. Write it down somewhere in your journal, speak it out loud in words of prayer: "Lord, I return to You. I choose You. I renounce the world. I renounce my former ways. I repent of my sinfulness. I choose the supreme good of knowing You in Jesus Christ, which is an upward calling." And wonderfully, as you make that proclamation, that decision, that acceptance of the love of He who loved you first, you make it with the whole church. We make it together as brothers and sisters who have collectively been lost, and continuously get lost, and we call each other back by the gift of God. And together, as a church in these final days of Lent, we lift our gaze from the things of the world and we return it to our perfect Heavenly Father. We accept His love. We let it wash over our lives, which is merciful, and we repent and believe, offering to Him that perfect response in the upward striving toward the goal. We offer Him our hearts, our whole hearts. And please, God, by the gift of a rich Lenten season, which is still not finished, that gift would be of our whole hearts.

I'm praying that you would be able to make that offering somehow, in your own words, in your own life, in your own story. And that through this season, you've come to recognize the importance and the beauty of your story, which is a story that fits into a bigger story. As a beloved one of God, who's a member of the body of Christ, this is surpassingly beautiful. And we are together in a journey that is full of richness. We celebrate it, and please, God, when the day arrives for us to rejoice in the resurrection, we will see the significance of He who has first moved upward, He who has first grabbed all of creation and pulled it back to where it belongs, the heart of the Father. May our rejoicing be full because of the way that we have acknowledged our great need, that we have prayed and fasted and given alms, sitting in ashes, and acknowledging especially that from that place He has come to rescue us, and our hearts are fully His.

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Let's pray. *In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Almighty God, You have done so much in our hearts in these weeks, this surpassing season of conversion, and yet there is still time, and there is still sinfulness. Our hearts still need You. Our lives are filled with the pattern and the memory of our fallenness. And so by this prayer, Lord, we place before You the remainder of this season, all of the minutes, the hours, the days, we place them before You and ask You to fill them with Your Holy Spirit in a way that jars us to a deeper awareness of Your constant whisper, of Your burning zeal, Your jealousy for our hearts, Your desire to have everything. And we ask you to help us be more responsive to that.*

*That as we have carved away certain things that we hung onto, as we have given You greater space by prayers, as we've offered gifts to those in need, we are ever more disposed to You, God. And so let Your desire for us meet our desire for You. Please, grant us the fullness of Your gifts in the remainder of this pilgrimage toward the rejoicing of Easter. That, with Jesus Christ and with the whole church, we would celebrate the ultimate and the supreme calling to be united to You forever. Mary, intercede for us, that the remainder of this time would be entirely as the Lord Jesus wants it to be, and that with you we would utter a full yes today to His invitation to do His holy will. We ask all of this in the name of Jesus Christ, who is Lord and King, forever and ever. Amen. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

Richest blessings to you all. Such a gift to walk with you in this time knowing that I am interceding, and I cannot wait to celebrate the fullness of Easter when the time arrives. God bless you until then. Let's go.