GREAT LENT

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Introduction

LENT: THE JOURNEY TO PASCHA[1]

When a man leaves on a journey, he must know where he is going. Thus with Lent. Above all, Lent is a spiritual journey and its destination is Easter, "the Feast of Feasts." It is the preparation for the "fulfillment of Pascha, the true Revelation." We must begin, therefore, by trying to understand this connection between Lent and Easter, for it reveals something very essential, very crucial about our Christian faith and life.

Is it necessary to explain that Easter is much more than one of the feasts, more than a yearly commemoration of a past event? Anyone who has, be it only once, taken part in that night which is "brighter than the day," who has tasted of that unique joy, knows it. But what is that joy about? Why can we sing, as we do during the Paschal liturgy: "today are all things filled with light, heaven and earth and places under the earth"? In what sense do we celebrate, as we claim we do, "the death of Death, the annihilation of Hell, the beginning of a new and everlasting life . . ."? To all these questions, the answer is: the *new life* which almost two thousand years ago shone forth from the grave, has been given to us, to all those

who believe in Christ. And it was given to us on the day of our Baptism, in which, as St. Paul says, we "were buried with Christ . . . unto death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead we also may walk in newness of life" (Rom. 6:4). Thus on Easter we celebrate Christ's Resurrection as something that happened and still happens *to us*. For each one of us received the gift of that new life and the power to accept it and to live by it. It is a gift which radically alters our attitude toward everything in this world, including death. It makes it possible for us joyfully to affirm: "Death is no more!" Oh, death is still there, to be sure, and we still face it and someday it will come and take us. But it is our whole faith that by His own death Christ changed the very nature of death, made it a *passage*—a "passover," a "Pascha"—into the Kingdom of God, transforming the tragedy of tragedies into the ultimate victory. "Trampling down death by death," He made us partakers of His Resurrection. This is why at the end of the Paschal Matins we say: "Christ is risen and life reigneth! Christ is risen and not one dead remains in the grave!"

Such is the faith of the Church, affirmed and made evident by her countless Saints. Is it not our daily experience, however, that this faith is very seldom ours, that all the time we lose and betray the "new life" which we received as a gift, and that in fact we live as if Christ did not rise from the dead, as if that unique event had no meaning whatsoever for us? All this because of our weakness, because of the impossibility for us to live constantly by "faith, hope, and love" on that level to which Christ raised us when he said: "Seek ye, first of all, the Kingdom of God and His righteousness." We simply forget all this—so busy are we, so immersed in our daily preoccupations—and because we forget, we fail. And through this forgetfulness, failure, and sin, our life becomes "old" again—petty, dark and ultimately meaningless—a meaningless journey toward a meaningless end. We manage to forget even death and then, all of a sudden, in the midst of our "enjoying life" it comes to us: horrible, inescapable, senseless. We may from time to time acknowledge and

confess our various "sins," yet we cease to refer our life to that new life which Christ revealed and gave to us. Indeed, we live as if He never came. This is the only real sin, the sin of all sins, the bottomless sadness and tragedy of our nominal Christianity.

If we realize this, then we may understand what Easter is and why it needs and presupposes Lent. For we may then understand that the liturgical traditions of the Church, all its cycles and services, exist, first of all, in order to help us recover the vision and the taste of that *new life* which we so easily lose and betray, so that we may repent and return to it. How can we love and desire something that we do not know? How can we put above everything else in our life something which we have not seen and enjoyed? In short: how can we seek a Kingdom of which we have no idea? It is the worship of the Church that was from the very beginning and still is our entrance into, our communion with, the *new life of the Kingdom*. It is through her liturgical life that the Church reveals to us something of that which "the ear has not heard, the eye has not seen, and what has not yet entered the heart of man, but which God has prepared for those who love Him." And in the center of that liturgical life, as its heart and climax, as the sun whose rays penetrate everywhere, stands *Pascha*. It is the door opened every year into the splendor of Christ's Kingdom, the foretaste of the eternal joy that awaits us, the glory of the victory which already, although invisibly, fills the whole creation: "death is no more!" The entire worship of the Church is organized around Easter, and therefore the liturgical year, i.e., the sequence of seasons and feasts, becomes a journey, a pilgrimage towards Pascha, the *End*, which at the same time is the *Beginning:* the end of all that which is "old"; the beginning of the new life, a constant "passage" from "this world" into the Kingdom already revealed in Christ.

And yet the "old" life, that of sin and pettiness, is not easily overcome and changed. The Gospel expects and requires from man an effort of which, in his present state, he is virtually incapable. We are challenged with

a vision, a goal, a way of life that is so much above our possibilities! For even the Apostles, when they heard their Master's teaching, asked Him in despair: "but how is this possible?" It is not easy, indeed, to reject a petty ideal of life made up of daily cares, of search for material goods, security, and pleasure, for an ideal of life in which nothing short of perfection is the goal: "be ye perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect." This world through all its "media" says: be happy, take it easy, follow the broad way. Christ in the Gospel says: choose the narrow way, fight and suffer, for this is the road to the only genuine happiness. And unless the Church helps, how can we make that awful choice, how can we *repent* and *return* to the glorious promise given us each year at Easter? This is where Great Lent comes in. This is the help extended to us by the Church, the school of repentance which alone will make it possible to receive Easter not as mere permission to eat, to drink, and to relax, but indeed as the end of the "old" in us, as our entrance into the "new."

In the early Church, the main purpose of Lent was to prepare the "catechumen," i.e., the newly converted Christian, for baptism which at that time was performed during the Paschal liturgy.[2] But even when the Church rarely baptized adults and the institution of the catechumenate disappeared, the basic meaning of Lent remained the same. For even though we are baptized, what we constantly lose and betray is precisely that which we received at Baptism. Therefore Easter is our return every year to our own Baptism, whereas Lent is our preparation for that return—the slow and sustained effort to perform, at the end, our own "passage" or "pascha" into the new life in Christ. If, as we shall see, lenten worship preserves even today its catechetical and baptismal character, it is not as "archeological" remains of the past, but as something valid and essential for us. For each year Lent and Easter are, once again, the rediscovery and the recovery by us of what we were made through our own baptismal death and resurrection.

A journey, a pilgrimage! Yet, as we begin it, as we

make the first step into the "bright sadness" of Lent, we see—far, far away—the destination. It is the joy of Easter, it is the entrance into the glory of the Kingdom. And it is this vision, the foretaste of Easter, that makes Lent's sadness bright and our lenten effort a "spiritual spring." The night may be dark and long, but all along the way a mysterious and radiant dawn seems to shine on the horizon. "Do not deprive us of our expectation, O Lover of man!"

guished. When the celebrant intones the petitions for the evening litany, the choir responds in the lenten "key." For the first time the lenten prayer of St. Ephrem accompanied by prostrations is read. At the end of the service all the faithful approach the priest and one another asking for mutual forgiveness. But as they perform this rite of reconciliation, as Lent is inaugurated by this movement of love, reunion, and brotherhood, the choir sings the Paschal hymns. We will have to wander forty days through the desert of Lent. Yet at the end shines already the light of Easter, the light of the Kingdom.

Chapter Two

THE LENTEN WORSHIP

1. "BRIGHT SADNESS"

For many, if not for the majority of Orthodox Christians, Lent consists of a limited number of formal, predominantly negative, rules and prescriptions: abstention from certain food, dancing, perhaps movies. Such is the degree of our alienation from the real spirit of the Church that it is almost impossible for us to understand that there is "something else" in Lent—something without which all these prescriptions lose much of their meaning. This "something else" can best be described as an "atmosphere," a "climate" into which one enters, as first of all a state of mind, soul, and spirit which for seven weeks permeates our entire life. Let us stress once more that the purpose of Lent is not to force on us a few formal obligations, but to "soften" our heart so that it may open itself to the realities of the spirit, to experience the hidden "thirst and hunger" for communion with God.

This lenten "atmosphere," this unique "state of mind," is brought about mainly by means of worship, by the various changes introduced during that season into the liturgical life.[4] Considered separately, these changes may appear as incomprehensible "rubrics," as formal prescriptions to be formally adhered to; but understood as a whole, they

reveal and communicate the spirit of Lent, they make us see, feel, and experience that *bright sadness* which is the true message and gift of Lent. One can say without exaggeration that the spiritual fathers and the sacred writers who composed the hymns of the *Lenten Triodion,* who little by little organized the general structures of the lenten services, who adorned the Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts with that special beauty which is proper to it, had a unique understanding of the human soul. They truly knew the art of repentance, and every year during Lent they make this art accesible to everyone who has ears to hear and eyes to see.

The general impression, I said, is that of "bright sadness." Even a man having only a limited knowledge of worship who enters a church during a lenten service would understand almost immediately, I am sure, what is meant by this somewhat contradictory expression. On the one hand, a certain quiet sadness permeates the service: vestments are dark, the services are longer than usual and more monotonous, there is almost no movement. Readings and chants alternate yet nothing seems to "happen." At regular intervals the priest comes out of the sanctuary and reads always the same short prayer, and the whole congregation punctuates every petition of that prayer with prostrations. Thus, for a long time we stand in this monotony—in this quiet sadness.

But then we begin to realize that this very length and monotony are needed if we are to experience the secret and at first unnoticeable "action" of the service in us. Little by little we begin to understand, or rather to feel, that this sadness is indeed "bright," that a mysterious transformation is about to take place in us. It is as if we were reaching a place to which the noises and the fuss of life, of the street, of all that which usually fills our days and even nights, have no access—a place where they have no power. All that which seemed so tremendously important to us as to fill our mind, that state of anxiety which has virtually become our second nature, disappear somewhere and we begin to feel free, light and happy. It is not the noisy and superficial happiness which

comes and goes twenty times a day and is so fragile and fugitive; it is a deep happiness which comes not from a single and particular reason but from our soul having, in the words of Dostoevsky, touched "another world." And that which it has touched is made up of light and peace and joy, of an inexpressible trust. We understand then why the services had to be long and seemingly monotonous. We understand that it is simply impossible to pass from our normal state of mind made up almost entirely of fuss, rush, and care, into this new one without first "quieting down," without restoring in ourselves a measure of inner stability. This is why those who think of church services only in terms of "obligations," who always inquire about the required minimum ("How often must we go to church?" "How often must we pray?") can never understand the true nature of worship which is to take us into a different world—that of God's Presence!—but to take us there slowly because our fallen nature has lost the ability to accede there naturally.

Thus, as we experience this mysterious liberation, as we become "light and peaceful," the monotony and the sadness of the service acquire a new significance, they are transfigured. An inner beauty illumines them like an early ray of the sun which, while it is still dark in the valley, begins to lighten up the top of the mountain. This light and secret joy come from the long alleluias,[5] from the entire "tonality" of lenten worship. What at first appeared as monotony now is revealed as peace; what sounded like sadness is now experienced as the very first movements of the soul recovering its lost depth. This is what the first verse of the lenten alleluia proclaims every morning: "My soul has desired Thee in the night, O God, before dawn, for Thy judgments are a light upon the earth!"

"Sad brightness": the sadness of my exile, of the waste I have made of my life; the brightness of God's presence and forgiveness, the joy of the recovered desire for God, the peace of the recovered home. Such is the climate of lenten worship; such is its first and general impact on my soul.

2. THE LENTEN PRAYER OF ST. EPHREM THE SYRIAN

Of all lenten hymns and prayers, one short prayer can be termed *the* lenten prayer. Tradition ascribes it to one of the great teachers of spiritual life—St. Ephrem the Syrian. Here is its text:

> O Lord and Master of my life!
> Take from me the spirit of sloth,
> faint-heartedness, lust of power, and idle talk.
> But give rather the spirit of chastity,
> humility, patience, and love to Thy servant.
> Yea, O Lord and King!
> Grant me to see my own errors
> and not to judge my brother;
> For Thou art blessed unto ages of ages. Amen.

This prayer is read twice at the end of each lenten service Monday through Friday (not on Saturdays and Sundays for, as we shall see later, the services of these days do not follow the lenten pattern). At the first reading, a prostration follows each petition. Then we all bow twelve times saying: "O God, cleanse me a sinner." The entire prayer is repeated with one final prostration at the end.

Why does this short and simple prayer occupy such an important position in the entire lenten worship? Because it enumerates in a unique way all the *negative* and *positive* elements of repentance and constitutes, so to speak, a "check list" for our individual lenten effort. This effort is aimed first at our liberation from some fundamental spiritual diseases which shape our life and make it virtually impossible for us even to start turning ourselves to God.

The basic disease is *sloth*. It is that strange laziness and passivity of our entire being which always pushes us "down" rather than "up"—which constantly convinces us that no change is possible and therefore desirable. It is in fact a deeply rooted cynicism which to every spiritual challenge responds "what for?" and makes our life one tremendous spiritual waste. It is the root of all sin because it poisons the spiritual energy at its very source.

laziness forgetfulness ignorance

The result of *sloth* is *faint-heartedness*. It is the state of despondency which all spiritual Fathers considered the greatest danger for the soul. Despondency is the impossibility for man to see anything good or positive; it is the reduction of everything to negativism and pessimism. It is truly a demonic power in us because the Devil is fundamentally a *liar*. He lies to man about God and about the world; he fills life with darkness and negation. Despondency is the suicide of the soul because when man is possessed by it he is absolutely unable to see the light and to desire it.

Lust of power! Strange as it may seem, it is precisely sloth and despondency that fill our life with *lust of power*. By vitiating the entire attitude toward life and making it meaningless and empty, they force us to seek compensation in a radically wrong attitude toward other persons. If my life is not oriented toward God, not aimed at eternal values, it will inevitably become selfish and self-centered and this means that all other beings will become means of my own self-satisfaction. If God is not the Lord and Master of my life, then I become my own lord and master—the absolute center of *my* own world, and I begin to evaluate everything in terms of *my* needs, *my* ideas, *my* desires, and *my* judgments. The lust of power is thus a fundamental depravity in my relationship to other beings, a search for their subordination to me. It is not necessarily expressed in the actual urge to command and to dominate "others." It may result as well in indifference, contempt, lack of interest, consideration, and respect. It is indeed sloth and despondency directed this time at others; it completes spiritual suicide with spiritual murder.

Finally, *idle talk*. Of all created beings, man alone has been endowed with the gift of speech. All Fathers see in it the very "seal" of the Divine Image in man because God Himself is revealed as Word (John 1:1). But being the supreme gift, it is by the same token the supreme danger. Being the very expression of man, the means of his self-fulfillment, it is for this very reason the means of his fall and self-destruction, of betrayal and

sin. The word saves and the word kills; the word inspires and the word poisons. The word is the means of Truth and it is the means of demonic Lie. Having an ultimate positive power, it has therefore a tremendous negative power. It truly creates positively or negatively. When deviated from its divine origin and purpose, the word becomes *idle*. It "enforces" sloth, despondency, and lust of power, and transforms life into hell. It becomes the very power of sin.

These four are thus the negative "objects" of repentance. They are the obstacles to be removed. But God alone can remove them. Hence, the first part of the lenten prayer—this cry from the bottom of human helplessness. Then the prayer moves to the positive aims of repentance which also are four.

Chastity! If one does not reduce this term, as is so often and erroneously done, only to its sexual connotations, it is understood as the positive counterpart of sloth. The exact and full translation of the Greek *sofrosini* and the Russian *tselomudryie* ought to be *whole-mindedness*. Sloth is, first of all, dissipation, the brokenness of our vision and energy, the inability to see the whole. Its opposite then is precisely *wholeness*. If we usually mean by chastity the virtue opposed to sexual depravity, it is because the broken character of our existence is nowhere better manifested than in sexual lust—the alienation of the body from the life and control of the spirit. Christ restores wholeness in us and He does so by restoring in us the true scale of values by leading us back to God.

The first and wonderful fruit of this wholeness or chastity is *humility*. We already spoke of it. It is above everything else the victory of truth in us, the elimination of all lies in which we usually live. *Humility* alone is capable of truth, of seeing and accepting things as they are and therefore of seeing God's majesty and goodness and love in everything. This is why we are told that God gives grace to the humble and resists the proud.

Chastity and humility are naturally followed by *patience*. The "natural" or "fallen" man is impatient, for being

blind to himself he is quick to judge and to condemn others. Having but a broken, incomplete, and distorted knowledge of everything, he measures all things by his tastes and his ideas. Being indifferent to everyone except himself, he wants life to be successful right here and now. Patience, however, is truly a divine virtue. God is patient not because He is "indulgent," but because He sees the depth of all that exists, because the inner reality of things, which in our blindness we do not see, is open to Him. The closer we come to God, the more patient we grow and the more we reflect that infinite respect for all beings which is the proper quality of God.

Finally, the crown and fruit of all virtues, of all growth and effort, is *love*—that love which, as we have already said, can be given by God alone—the gift which is the goal of all spiritual preparation and practice.

All this is summarized and brought together in the concluding petition of the lenten prayer in which we ask "to see my own errors and not to judge my brother." For ultimately there is but one danger: *pride*. Pride is the source of evil, and all evil is pride. Yet it is not enough for me to see my own errors, for even this apparent virtue can be turned into pride. Spiritual writings are full of warnings against the subtle forms of pseudo-piety which, in reality, under the cover of humility and self-accusation can lead to a truly demonic pride. But when we "see our own errors" *and* "do not judge our brothers," when, in other terms, chastity, humility, patience, and love are but one in us, then and only then the ultimate enemy—pride—will be destroyed in us.

After each petition of the prayer we make a prostration. Prostrations are not limited to the Prayer of St. Ephrem but constitute one of the distinctive characteristics of the entire lenten worship. Here, however, their meaning is disclosed best of all. In the long and difficult effort of spiritual recovery, the Church does not separate the soul from the body. The whole man has fallen away from God; the whole man is to be restored, the whole man is to return. The catastrophe of sin lies precisely in the victory of the

flesh—the animal, the irrational, the lust in us—over the spiritual and the divine. But the body is glorious, the body is holy, so holy that God Himself "became flesh." Salvation and repentance then are not contempt for the body or neglect of it, but restoration of the body to its real function as the expression and the life of spirit, as the temple of the priceless human soul. Christian asceticism is a fight, not *against* but *for* the body. For this reason, the whole man—soul and body—repents. The body participates in the prayer of the soul just as the soul prays through and in the body. Prostrations, the "psycho-somatic" sign of repentance and humility, of adoration and obedience, are thus the lenten rite *par excellence.*

3. THE HOLY SCRIPTURES

The prayer of the Church is always *biblical*—i.e., expressed in the language, images, and symbols of the Holy Scriptures. If the Bible contains the Divine Revelation to man, it is also man's inspired response to that Revelation and thus the pattern and the content of man's prayer, praise, and adoration. For example, thousands of years have passed since the Psalms were composed; yet when man needs to express repentance, the shock of his entire being at the challenge of divine mercy, he still finds the only adequate expression in the penitential Psalm beginning, "Have mercy on me, O God!" Every imaginable situation of man before God, the world, and other men, from the overwhelming joy of God's presence to the abysmal despair of man's exile, sin, and alienation has found its perfect expression in this unique Book which, for this reason, has always constituted the daily nourishment of the Church, the means of her worship and self-edification.

During Great Lent the biblical dimension of worship is given increased emphasis. One can say that the forty days of Lent are, in a way, the return of the Church into the spiritual situation of the Old Testament—the time *before* Christ, the time of repentance and expectation, the

time of the "history of salvation" moving *toward* its fulfillment in Christ. This return is necessary because even though we belong to the time *after Christ,* and know Him, and have been "baptized into Him," we constantly fall away from the new life received from Him, and this means lapse again into the "old" time. The Church, on the one hand, is already "at home" for she *is* the "grace of Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the communion of the Holy Spirit"; yet, on the other hand, she is also "on her way" as the pilgrimage—long and difficult—toward the fulfillment of all things in God, the return of Christ and the end of all time.

Great Lent is the season when this second aspect of the Church, of her life as expectation and journey, is being actualized. It is here, therefore, that the Old Testament acquires its whole significance: as the Book not only of prophecies which have been fulfilled, but of man and the entire creation "on their way" to the Kingdom of God.

Two main principles govern the use of the Old Testament in lenten worship[6]: the "double reading" of the *Psalter;* and the *lectio continua,* i.e., the reading virtually in their totality of three books—*Genesis, Isaiah* and *Proverbs. Psalms* have always occupied a central and indeed unique place in Christian worship.[7] The Church sees in them not only the best, the most adequate and perfect expression of man's prayer, repentance, adoration, and praise, but a true verbal icon of Christ and the Church, a revelation within the Revelation. For the Fathers, says an exegete of their writings, "only Christ and His Church pray, weep, and speak in this Book." From the very beginning, the *Psalms* constituted, therefore, the very foundation of the Church's prayer, her "natural language." They are used in worship first as "fixed Psalms," i.e., as the permanent material of all daily services: the "evening Psalm" (Ps. 104) at Vespers; the Six Psalms (Psalms 3, 38, 63, 88, 103, 143), the Praises (Psalms 148, 149, 150) at Matins; and groups of three Psalms at the Hours, etc. From the *Psalter* are selected the *prokeimena,* verses for the alleluias, etc., for all feasts and commemorations of the liturgical year. And

finally, the entire *Psalter,* divided into twenty parts or *kathismata,* is chanted in its totality every week at Vespers and Matins. It is this third use of the *Psalter* that is doubled during Lent; the *Psalter* is chanted not once but twice every week of Lent, and portions of it are included in the Third and Sixth Hours.

The "continuous reading" of *Genesis, Isaiah* and *Proverbs* has its origin at the time when Lent was still the main pre-baptismal season of the Church and lenten services were predominantly *catechetical* in their character, i.e., dedicated to the indoctrination of the catechumen. Each of the three books corresponds to one of the three basic aspects of the Old Testament: the history of God's activity in Creation, prophecy, and the ethical or moral teachings. The Book of *Genesis* gives, as it were, the "framework" of the Church's faith. It contains the story of Creation, of the Fall, and finally that of the promise and the beginning of salvation through God's Covenant with his chosen people. It conveys the three fundamental dimensions of the Church's belief in God as Creator, Judge, and Savior. It reveals the roots of the Christian understanding of man as created in the "image and likeness of God," as falling away from God, and as remaining the object of divine love, care, and ultimately salvation. It discloses the meaning of history as the *history of salvation* leading to and fulfilled in Christ. It announces the mystery of the Church through the images and realities of the People of God, Covenant, Ark, etc. *Isaiah* is the greatest of all prophets and the reading of his book during Lent is meant to reveal once more the great mystery of salvation through the sufferings and sacrifices of Christ. Finally, the Book of *Proverbs* is the *epitome* of the ethical teachings of the Old Testament, of the moral law and wisdom—without whose acceptance man cannot understand his alienation from God and is unable therefore even to hear the good news of forgiveness through love and grace.

Lessons from these three books are read daily during Lent, Monday through Friday: *Genesis* and *Proverbs* at Vespers, and *Isaiah* at the Sixth Hour. And although Lent has long ago ceased to be the catechetical season of the

Church, the initial purpose of these readings keeps its full significance. Our Christian faith needs this annual return to its biblical roots and foundation for there can be no end to our growth in the understanding of Divine Revelation. The Bible is not a collection of dogmatic "propositions" to be accepted and memorized once for all, but the living voice of God speaking to us again and again, taking us always deeper into the inexhaustible riches of His Wisdom and Love. There is no greater tragedy in our Church than the almost total ignorance by her members of the Holy Scriptures and, what is worse, our virtually total indifference toward them. What for the Fathers and Saints was endless joy, interest, spiritual and intellectual growth, is for so many Orthodox today an antiquated text with no meaning for their lives. It is to be hoped, therefore, that as the spirit and significance of Lent are recovered, this will also mean the recovery of the Scriptures as true spiritual food and communion with God.

4. THE TRIODION

Great Lent has its own liturgical book—*The Lenten Triodion.* It contains hymns and biblical readings for every day of the lenten season beginning with the Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee and ending with Vespers of Great and Holy Saturday. The hymns of the Triodion were composed in the main part after the virtual disappearance of the Catechumenate (i.e., adult baptism and the necessity of preparing candidates for it). Their emphasis, therefore, is not on Baptism but on repentance. Unfortunately very few people today know and understand the unique beauty and depth of this lenten hymnography. The ignorance of the *Triodion* is the principal cause of the slow transformation of the very understanding of Lent, of its purpose and meaning—a transformation which took place little by little in the Christian mentality and reduced Lent to a juridical "obligation" and a set of dietary laws. The real inspiration and challenge of Lent is all but lost

Chapter Five

LENT IN OUR LIFE

1. "TAKING IT SERIOUSLY . . ."

So far we have been speaking of the Church's teaching about Lent as conveyed to us primarily by lenten worship. Now these questions must be asked: How can we apply this teaching to our lives? What could be not only a nominal but a real impact of Lent on our existence? This existence (do we need to recall it) is very different from the one people led when all these services, hymns, canons, and prescriptions were composed and established. One lived then in a relatively small, mainly rural community within one organically Orthodox world; the very rhythm of one's life was shaped by the Church. Now, however, we live in an enormous urban, technological society which is pluralistic in its religious beliefs, secularistic in its world view, and in which we Orthodox constitute an insignificant minority. Lent is no longer "visible" as it was, let us say, in Russia or in Greece. Our question thus is a very real one: how can we—besides introducing one or two "symbolical" changes into our daily life—keep Lent?

It is obvious, for example, that for the great majority of the faithful the daily attendance at lenten worship is out of the question. They continue to go to church on Sundays, but, as we already know, on Sundays of Lent the

Liturgy, at least in its externals, does not reflect Lent and thus one can hardly have even a "feel" of the lenten type of worship, the main means by which the spirit of Lent is communicated to us. And since Lent is in no way reflected in the culture to which we belong, it is no wonder then that ours today is mainly a *negative* understanding of Lent—as a season when certain different things such as meat and fats, dancing and entertainment are forbidden. The popular question, "What are you giving up for Lent?" is a good summary of that common negative approach. In "positive" terms, Lent is viewed as the time when we must fulfill the annual "obligation" of Confession and Communion ("... and not later than Palm Sunday...," as I have read in a parish bulletin). This obligation having been fulfilled, the rest of Lent seems to lose all positive meaning.

Thus it is evident that there has developed a rather deep discrepancy between, on the one hand, the spirit or the "theory" of Lent, which we tried to outline on the basis of lenten worship, and, on the other hand, its common and popular understanding which is very often shared and supported not only by laity but also by clergy themselves. For it is always easier to reduce something spiritual to something formal rather than search for the spiritual behind the formal. We can say without any exaggeration that although Lent is still "observed," it has lost much of its impact on our lives, has ceased to be that bath of repentance and renewal which it is meant to be in the liturgical and spiritual teaching of the Church. But then, can we rediscover it, make it again a spiritual power in the daily reality of our existence? The answer to this question depends primarily, and I would say almost exclusively, on whether or not we are willing to *take Lent seriously*. However new or different the conditions in which we live today, however real the difficulties and obstacles erected by our modern world, *none* of them is an *absolute* obstacle, none of them makes Lent "impossible." The real root of the progressive loss by Lent of its impact on our lives lies deeper. It is our conscious or unconscious reduction of religion to a superficial nominalism and symbolism which is precisely the way to by-pass

and to "explain away" the seriousness of religion's demands on our lives, religion's demand for commitment and effort. This reduction, we must add, is in a way peculiar to Orthodoxy. Western Christians, Catholics or Protestants, when faced with what they consider as "impossible" would rather change religion itself, "adjust" it to new conditions and thus make it "practicable." Quite recently, for example, we have seen the Roman Church first reduce fasting to a bare minimum and then practically dispose of it altogether. With just and righteous indignation, we denounce such an "adjustment" as a betrayal of Christian tradition and as minimizing Christian faith. And indeed, it is the truth and the glory of Orthodoxy that it does not "adjust" itself to and compromise with the lower standards, that it does not make Christianity "easy." It is the glory of *Orthodoxy,* but certainly *not* of us Orthodox people. Not today, not even yesterday, but long ago we have found a way to reconcile the absolute demands of the Church and our human weakness, and this not only without "losing face" but with additional reasons for self-righteousness and good conscience. The method consists of fulfilling these demands symbolically, and symbolic nominalism permeates today our whole religious life. Thus, for example, we would not even think of revising our liturgy and its monastic regulations—God forbid!—we will simply keep calling a one-hour service an "All-Night Vigil" and proudly explain that it is the same service the monks of the Lavra of St. Sabbas served in the 9th century. In regard to Lent, instead of asking fundamental questions—"What is fasting?" or "What is Lent?"—we satisfy ourselves with Lenten symbolism. In church magazines and bulletins appear recipes for "delicious lenten dishes," and a parish might even raise some additional money by means of a well-advertized "tasty lenten dinner." So much in our churches is explained sympolically as interesting, colorful, and amusing customs and traditions, as something which connects us not so much with God and a new life in Him but with the past and the customs of our forefathers, that it becomes increasingly difficult to discern behind this religious folklore the utter seriousness of religion. Let

me stress that there is nothing wrong in the various customs themselves. When they appeared they were the means and the expressions of a society *taking religion seriously;* they were not symbols, but life itself. What happened, however, was that as life changed and became less and less shaped by religion in its totality, a few customs survived as symbols of a way of life no longer lived. And what survived was that which on the one hand is most colorful and on the other hand the least difficult. The spiritual danger here is that little by little one begins to understand religion itself as a system of symbols and customs rather than to understand the latter as a challenge to spiritual renewal and effort. More effort goes into preparing lenten dishes or Easter baskets than into fasting and participation in the spiritual reality of Easter. This means that as long as customs and traditions are not connected again with the total religious world view which produced them, as long as symbols are not taken *seriously,* the Church will remain disconnected from life and have no power over life. Instead of symbolizing our "rich heritage," we must start integrating it into our real life.

To *take Lent seriously* means then that we will consider it first of all on the deepest possible level—as a spiritual challenge which requires a response, a decision, a plan, a continuous effort. It is for this reason, as we know, that the weeks of preparation for Lent were established by the Church. This is the time for the response, for the decision and the planning. And the best and easiest way here is to follow the Church's guidance—be it only by meditating on the five Gospel themes offered to us on the five Sundays of the pre-lenten season: that of desire (Zacchaeus), of humility (Publican and Pharisee), of the return from exile (Prodigal Son), of the judgment (Last Judgment), and of forgiveness (Forgiveness Sunday). These Gospel lessons are not merely to be listened to in church; the whole point is that they are to be "taken home" and meditated upon in terms of *my* life, *my* family situation, *my* professional obligations, *my* concern for material things, *my* relation to the concrete human beings with whom I

live. If to this meditation one adds the prayer of that pre-lenten season, "Open to me the gates of repentance, O Giver of Life . . . ," and Psalm 137—"By the rivers of Babylon . . ."—one begins to understand what it means to "feel with the Church" how a liturgical season colors the daily life. It is also a good time to read a religious book. The purpose of this reading is not only to increase our knowledge about religion; it is mainly to purify our mind from all that which usually fills it. It is simply incredible how crowded our minds are with all kinds of cares, interests, anxieties, and impressions, and how little control we have over that crowd. Reading a religious book, concentrating our attention on something entirely different from the usual contents of our thinking, creates by itself another mental and spiritual atmosphere. These are not "recipes"—there may be other ways of preparing oneself for Lent. The important point is that during this pre-lenten season we look at Lent as it were from a distance, as something coming to us or even perhaps sent to us by God Himself, as a chance for a change, for renewal, for deepening, and that we take that forthcoming chance *seriously,* so that on Forgiveness Sunday when we leave our home for Vespers we may be ready to make ours—be it only in a small way—the words of the *Great Prokeimenon* which will inaugurate Lent:

> Turn not away Thy face from Thy servant,
> for I am afflicted . . . .

2. PARTICIPATION IN LENTEN SERVICES

No one, as we have already said, can attend the entire cycle of lenten worship. Everyone *can* attend some of it. There is simply no excuse for not making Lent first of all the time for an increased attendance of and participation in the liturgy of the Church. Here again, personal conditions, individual possibilities and impossibilities can vary and result in different decisions, but there must be a decision, there must be an effort, and there must be a "follow-up."

From the liturgical point of view, we may suggest the following "minimum" aimed not at the spiritually self-destructive sense of having fulfilled an obligation, but at receiving at least the essential in the liturgical spirit of Lent.

In the first place, a special effort must be made on the parish level for a proper celebration of the *Forgiveness Sunday Vespers*. It is indeed a tragedy that in so many churches this service is either not celebrated at all, or not given sufficient care and attention. It must become one of the great "parish affairs" of the year and, as such, well prepared. The preparation must consist in training the choir, explaining the service by means of sermons or parish bulletins, planning it for a time when the greatest number of parishioners can attend; in short: in making it a true spiritual *event*. For, once more, nothing better than this service reveals the meaning of Lent as the crisis of repentance, reconciliation, as embarking together on a common journey.

The next "priority" must be given to the first week of Lent. A special effort must be made to attend at least once or twice the *Great Canon of St. Andrew*. As we have seen, the liturgical function of these first days is to take us into the spiritual "mood" of Lent which we described as "bright sadness."

Then, throughout the entire Lent, it is imperative that we give at least one evening to attend the *Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts* with the spiritual experience it implies—that of total fasting, that of the transformation of at least one day into a real expectation of judgment and joy. No reference to conditions of life, lack of time, etc., are acceptable at this point, for if we do only that which easily "fits" into the conditions of our lives, the very notion of lenten effort becomes absolutely meaningless. Not only in the 20th century, but in fact since Adam and Eve, "this world" was always an obstacle to the fulfillment of God's demands. There is, therefore, nothing new or special about our modern "way of life." Ultimately it all depends again on whether or not we take our religion *seriously*, and if we do, eight or ten additional evenings a year at church are

truly a minimal effort. Deprived of that evening, however, we are depriving ourselves not only of the beauty and the depth of the lenten services, not only of a necessary spiritual inspiration and help, but of that which, as we shall see in the next section, makes our fasting meaningful and effective.

3. "... BUT BY PRAYER AND FASTING"

There is no Lent without fasting. It seems, however, that many people today either do not take fasting seriously or, if they do, misunderstand its real spiritual goals. For some people, fasting consists in a symbolic "giving up" of something; for some others, it is a scrupulous observance of dietary regulations. But in both cases, seldom is fasting referred to the total lenten effort. Here as elsewhere, therefore, we must first try to understand the Church's teaching about fasting and then ask ourselves: how can we apply this teaching to our life?

Fasting or abstinence from food is not exclusively a Christian practice. It existed and still exists in other religions and even outside religion, as for example in some specific therapies. Today people fast (or abstain) for all kinds of reasons, including sometimes political reasons. It is important, therefore, to discern the uniquely Christian content of fasting. It is first of all revealed to us in the interdependence between two events which we find in the Bible: one at the beginning of the Old Testament and the other at the beginning of the New Testament. The first event is the "breaking of the fast" by Adam in Paradise. He ate of the forbidden fruit. This is how man's original sin is revealed to us. Christ, the New Adam—and this is the second event—begins by fasting. Adam was tempted and he succumbed to temptation; Christ was tempted and He overcame that temptation. The results of Adam's failure are expulsion from Paradise and death. The fruits of Christ's victory are the destruction of death and our return to Paradise. The lack of space prevents us from giving a detailed explanation of the meaning of this parallelism. It is clear, however, that in this perspective

fasting is revealed to us as something decisive and ultimate in its importance. It is not a mere "obligation," a custom; it *is* connected with the very mystery of life and death, of salvation and damnation.

In the Orthodox teaching, sin is not only the transgression of a rule leading to punishment; it is always a mutilation of life given to us by God. It is for this reason that the story of the original sin is presented to us as an act of eating. For food is means of life; it is that which keeps us alive. But here lies the whole question: what does it mean to be alive and what does "life" mean? For us today this term has a primarily biological meaning: life is precisely that which entirely depends on food, and more generally, on the physical world. But for the Holy Scripture and for Christian Tradition, this life "by bread alone" is identified with death because it is mortal life, because death is a principle always at work in it. God, we are told, "created no death." He is the Giver of Life. How then did life become mortal? Why is death and death alone the only absolute condition of that which exists? The Church answers: because man rejected life as it was offered and given to him by God and preferred a life depending not on God alone but on "bread alone." Not only did he disobey God for which he was punished; he changed the very relationship between himself and the world. To be sure, the world was given to him by God as "food"—as means of life; yet life was meant to be communion with God; it had not only its end but its full content in Him. "In Him was Life and the Life was the light of man." The world and food were thus created as means of communion with God, and only if accepted for God's sake were to give life. In itself food has no life and cannot give life. Only God has Life and is Life. In food itself God—and not calories—was the principle of life. Thus to eat, to be alive, to know God and be in communion with Him were one and the same thing. The unfathomable tragedy of Adam is that he ate for its own sake. More than that, he ate "apart" from God in order to be independent of Him. And if he did it, it is because he believed that food had life in

itself and that he, by partaking of that food, could be like God, i.e., have life in himself. To put it very simply: he *believed in food,* whereas the only object of belief, of faith, of dependence is God and God alone. World, food, became his gods, the sources and principles of his life. He became their slave. *Adam*—in Hebrew—means "man." It is my name, our common name. Man is still Adam, still the slave of "food." He may claim that he believes in God but God is not his life, his food, the all-embracing content of his existence. He may claim that he receives his life from God but he doesn't live in God and for God. His science, his experience, his self-consciousness are all built on that same principle: "by bread alone." We eat in order to be alive but we are not alive in God. This is the sin of all sins. This is the verdict of death pronounced on our life.

Christ is the New Adam. He comes to repair the damage inflicted on life by Adam, to restore man to true life, and thus He also begins with fasting. "When He had fasted forty days and forty nights, He became hungry" (Matt. 4:2). Hunger is that state in which we realize our dependence on something else—when we urgently and essentially need food—showing thus that we have no life in ourselves. It is that limit beyond which I either die from starvation or, having satisfied my body, have again the impression of being alive. It is, in other words, the time when we face the ultimate question: on what does my life depend? And, since the question is not an academic one but is felt with my entire body, it is also the time of temptation. Satan came to Adam in Paradise; he came to Christ in the desert. He came to two hungry men and said: eat, for your hunger is the proof that you depend entirely on food, that your life is in food. And Adam believed and ate; but Christ rejected that temptation and said: man shall not live by bread alone but by God. He refused to accept that cosmic lie which Satan imposed on the world, making that lie a self-evident truth not even debated any more, the foundation of our entire world view, of science, medicine, and perhaps even of religion. By doing this, Christ restored that relation-

ship between food, life, and God which Adam broke, and which we still break every day.

What then is fasting for us Christians? It is our entrance and participation in that experience of Christ Himself by which He liberates us from the total dependence on food, matter, and the world. By no means is our liberation a full one. Living still in the fallen world, in the world of the Old Adam, being part of it, we still depend on food. But just as our death—through which we still must pass—has become by virtue of Christ's Death a passage into life, the food we eat and the life it sustains can be life in God and for God. Part of our food has already become "food of immortality"—the Body and Blood of Christ Himself. But even the daily bread we receive from God can be in this life and in this world that which strengthens us, our communion with God, rather than that which separates us from God. Yet it is only fasting that can perform that transformation, giving us the existential proof that our dependence on food and matter is not total, not absolute, that united to prayer, grace, and adoration, it can itself be spiritual.

All this means that deeply understood, fasting is the only means by which man recovers his true spiritual nature. It is not a theoretical but truly a practical challenge to the great Liar who managed to convince us that we depend on bread alone and built all human knowledge, science, and existence on that lie. Fasting is a denunciation of that lie and also the proof that it is a lie. It is highly significant that it was while fasting that Christ met Satan and that He said later that Satan cannot be overcome "but by fasting and prayer." Fasting is the real fight against the Devil because it is the challenge to that one all-embracing law which makes him the "Prince of this world." Yet if one is hungry and then discovers that he can truly be independent of that hunger, not be destroyed by it but just on the contrary, can transform it into a source of spiritual power and victory, then nothing remains of that great lie in which we have been living since Adam.

How far we are by now from the usual understanding

of fasting as a mere change of diet, as what is permitted and what is forbidden, from all that superficial hypocrisy! Ultimately, to fast means only one thing: *to be hungry*—to go to the limit of that human condition which depends entirely on food and, being hungry, to discover that this dependency is not the whole truth about man, that hunger itself is first of all a spiritual state and that it is in its last reality *hunger for God.* In the early Church, fasting always meant total abstinence, a state of hunger, pushing the body to the extreme. It is here, however, that we discover also that fasting as a physical effort is totally meaningless without its spiritual counterpart: "... by fasting and *prayer.*" This means that without the corresponding spiritual effort, without feeding ourselves with Divine Reality, without discovering our total dependence on God and God alone, physical fasting would indeed be suicide. If Christ Himself was tempted while fasting, we have not a single chance of avoiding that temptation. Physical fasting, essential as it is, is not only meaningless, it is truly dangerous if it is disconnected from the spiritual effort—from prayer and concentration on God. Fasting is an art fully mastered by Saints; it would be presumptuous and dangerous for us if we attempted that art without discernment and caution. The entire lenten worship is a constant reminder of the difficulties, the obstacles, and the temptations that await those who think that they may depend on their will power and not on God.

It is for this reason that we need first of all a spiritual preparation for the effort of fasting. It consists in asking God for help and also in making our fast God-centered. We should fast for God's sake. We must rediscover our body as the Temple of His Presence. We must recover a religious *respect* for the body, for food, for the very rhythm of life. All this must be done before the actual fast begins so that when we begin to fast, we would be supplied with spiritual weapons, with a vision, with a spirit of fight and victory.

Then comes the fast itself. In accordance with what has been said above, it should be practiced on two levels:

first, as *ascetical* fast; and second, as *total* fast. The *ascetical* fast consists of a drastic reduction of food so that the permanent state of a certain hunger might be lived as a reminder of God and a constant effort to keep our mind on Him. Everyone who has practiced it—be it only a little—knows that this ascetical fast rather than weakening us makes us light, concentrated, sober, joyful, pure. One receives food as a real gift of God. One is constantly directed at that inner world which inexplicably becomes a kind of food in its own right. The exact amount of food to be received in this ascetical fasting, its rhythm and its quality, need not be discussed here; they depend on our individual capacities, the external conditions of our lives. But the principle is clear: it is a state of half-hunger whose "negative" nature is at all times transformed by prayer, memory, attention, and concentration into a *positive* power. As to the *total* fast, it is of necessity to be limited in duration and coordinated with the Eucharist. In our present condition of life, its best form is the day before the evening celebration of the Presanctified Liturgy. Whether we fast on that day from early morning or from noon, the main point here is to live through that day as a day of expectation, hope, hunger for God Himself. It is a spiritual concentration on that which comes, on the gift to be received, and for the sake of which one gives up all other gifts.

After all this is said, one must still remember that however limited our fasting, if it is true fasting it will lead to temptation, weakness, doubt, and irritation. In other terms, it will be a real fight and probably we shall fail many times. But the very discovery of Christian life as fight and effort is the *essential aspect of fasting.* A faith which has not overcome doubts and temptation is seldom a real faith. No progress in Christian life is possible, alas, without the bitter experience of failures. Too many people start fasting with enthusiasm and give up after the first failure. I would say that it is at this first failure that the real test comes. If after having failed and surrendered to our appetites and passions we start all over again and do not give up no matter how many times we fail, sooner

or later our fasting will bear its spiritual fruits. Between holiness and disenchanted cynicism lies the great and divine virtue of *patience*—patience, first of all with ourselves. There is no short-cut to holiness; for every step we have to pay the full price. Thus it is better and safer to begin at a minimum—just slightly above our natural possibilities—and to increase our effort little by little, than to try jumping too high at the beginning and to break a few bones when falling back to earth.

In summary: from a symbolic and nominal fast—the fast as obligation and custom—we must return to the *real* fast. Let it be limited and humble but consistent and serious. Let us honestly face our spiritual and physical capacity and act accordingly—remembering however that there is no fast without challenging that capacity, without introducing into our life a divine proof that things impossible with men are possible with God.

4. A LENTEN "STYLE OF LIFE"

Attending liturgical services, fasting, and even praying at regular intervals do not exhaust the lenten effort. Or rather, in order to be effective and meaningful, they need the support of our whole life. They need, in other terms, a "style of life" which would not be in contradiction with them, would not lead to a "split" existence. In the past, in Orthodox countries, such support was given by society itself: it was that complex of customs, external changes, legislation, and public and private observances which is covered by the Russian word *"byt"* and which is partly rendered by the English word *culture.* During Lent, the whole society accepted a certain rhythm of life, certain rules, which kept reminding the individual members of that society of the lenten season. In Russia, for example, one could not forget Lent if only because of a special lenten church bell ringing; theaters were closed; and, in more ancient times, the courts suspended their activities. By themselves, all those externals were obviously unable

to force man into repentance or toward a more active religious life. But they created a certain atmosphere—a kind of lenten climate—in which personal effort was made easier. Being weak, we need external reminders, symbols, signs. Of course there is always the danger that these external symbols may become ends in themselves and instead of being mere reminder become in popular opinion the very content of Lent. This danger has already been mentioned above when we spoke of external customs and observances replacing genuine personal effort. Properly understood, however, these customs constitute that "belt" which connnects the spiritual effort to the totality of life.

We are not living in an Orthodox society and no lenten "climate" can therefore be created on a social level. Lent or no Lent, the world around us and of which we are an integral part does not change. Consequently, this requires from us a new effort of rethinking the necessary religious relationship between the "external" and "internal." The spiritual tragedy of secularism is that it forces us into a real religious "schizophrenia"—dividing our life into two parts: the religious and the secular, which are less and less interdependent. Thus a spiritual effort is needed in order to transpose the traditional customs and reminders, the very means of our lenten effort. In a tentative and, of necessity, schematic way, one can consider this effort in terms first of *home,* and second, *out of home* existence.

In the Orthodox world view, the home and the family constitute the first and most important area of Christian life, of *application* of Christian principles to daily existence. It is certainly the home, the very style and spirit of family life, and not the school, not even the Church, that shapes our fundamental world view, that shapes in us that fundamental orientation of which we may not even be aware for a long time, but which ultimately will become a decisive factor. Dostoevsky's "staretz" Zosima—in *The Brothers Karamazov*—says: "A man who from his childhood can remember good things is saved for his whole life." It is very significant that he makes this remark after recalling his mother taking him to the Presanctified Liturgy, the

beauty of the service, the unique lenten melody of "Let my prayer be set forth in Thy sight as incense . . .". The wonderful effort of religious education which is being made today in our church schools will mean very little unless it is rooted in the home and family life. What then could and should be done during Lent at home? Since it is impossible to cover here all aspects of family life, I will concentrate on one of them.

Everyone will no doubt agree that the whole style of family existence has been radically altered by radio and television. These media of "mass communication" permeate today our whole life. One does not have to "go out" in order to "be out." The whole world is permanently here within my reach. And, little by little, the elementary experience of living within an inner world, of the beauty of that "interiority," simply disappears from our modern culture. If it is not television, it is music. Music has ceased to be something one listens to; it is fast becoming a kind of "background sound" for conversation, reading, writing, etc. In fact, this need for permanent music reveals the incapacity of modern man to enjoy silence, to understand it not as something negative, as a mere absence, but precisely as a presence and the condition for all real presence. If the Christian of the past lived in great measure in a silent world, giving him ample opportunity for concentration and inner life, today's Christian has to make a special effort to recover that essential dimension of silence which alone can put us in contact with higher realities. Thus the problem of radio and TV during Lent is not a marginal one but in many ways a matter of spiritual life or death. One must realize that it is impossible simply to split our life between the "bright sadness" of Lent and "The Late Show." Those two experiences are incompatible and one eventually kills the other. It is very likely, however, that unless a special effort is made "The Late Show" has a greater chance against the "bright sadness" than vice versa. A first "custom" to be suggested, therefore, is that the use of TV and radio be drastically reduced during Lent. We do not dare to hope here for a "total" fast but only for an "ascetical" one which,

as we know, means first of all a change of diet and its reduction. There is nothing wrong, for example, with continuing to watch the news or selecting serious, interesting, and intellectually or spiritually enriching programs. What must be stopped during Lent is the "addiction" to TV—the transformation of man into a vegetable in an armchair, glued to the screen and passively accepting anything coming from it. When I was a child (this was the pre-TV era) my mother used to lock the piano during the first, fourth, and seventh weeks of Lent. I remember this more vividly than the long lenten services, and even today a radio playing during Lent shocks me as almost a blasphemy. This personal recollection is only an illustration of the impact some very external decisions can have on a child's soul. And what is involved here is not a mere isolated custom or rule but the experience of Lent as a special time, as something which is constantly present and must not be lost, mutilated, or destroyed. Here also however, as with fasting, a mere absence or abstinence is not sufficient; it must have its positive counterpart.

The silence created by the absence of the world's noises made available by the media of mass communication is to be filled with positive content. If prayer feeds our soul, our intellect also needs its food for it is precisely the intellect of man which is being destroyed today by the ceaseless hammering of TV, radio, newspapers, pictorial magazines, etc. What we suggest then, in addition to the purely spiritual effort, is an intellectual effort. How many masterpieces, how many wonderful fruits of human thought, imagination, and creativity we neglect in our life simply because it is so much easier returning home from work in a state of physical and mental fatigue to push the TV button or to plunge into the perfect vacuum of an illustrated magazine. But suppose we plan our Lent? Suppose we make in advance a reasonable list of books to be read during Lent? Not all of them must necessarily be religious books; not all people are called to be theologians. Yet there is so much implicit "theology" in certain literary masterpieces, and everything which enriches our intellect,

every fruit of true human creativity, is blessed by the Church and, properly used, acquires a spiritual value. In the preceding chapter I have mentioned that the fourth and fifth Sundays of Lent are dedicated to the commemoration of two great teachers of Christian spirituality: *St. John of the Ladder* and *St. Mary of Egypt.* Let us understand this as a broad indication that what the Church wants us to do during Lent is to seek the enrichment of our spiritual and intellectual inner world, to read and to meditate upon those things which are most likely to help us recover that inner world and its joy. Of that joy, of the true vocation of man, the one that is fulfilled inside and not outside, the "modern world" gives us no taste today; yet without it, without the understanding of Lent as a journey into the depth of our humanity, Lent loses its meaning.

Secondly, what could be the meaning of Lent during the long hours we spend outside of home—commuting, sitting at our desks, taking care of our professional duties, meeting our colleagues and friends? Although no clear-cut "recipe" can be given here as in any other area, some very general considerations are possible. In the first place, Lent is a good time to measure the incredibly superficial character of our relations with men, things, and work. The "keep smiling" and "take it easy" slogans are truly the great "commandments" which we joyfully keep, and they mean: don't get involved, don't question, don't deepen your relations with human beings; keep the rules of the game which combine a friendly attitude with total indifference; think of everything in terms of material gains, benefits, advancement; be, in other terms, a part of the world which, while constantly using the great words "freedom," "responsibility," "care," etc., *de facto* follows the materialistic principle that man is what he eats! Lent is the time for the search for *meaning:* meaning of my professional life in terms of vocation; meaning of my relationship to other persons; meaning of friendship; meaning of my responsibility. There is no job, no vocation, which cannot be "transformed"—be it only a little—in terms not of greater efficiency or better organization but in those of human

value. It is the same effort of "interiorization" of all our relations that is needed here, for we are free human beings who have become (without very often knowing it) prisoners of systems that progressively de-humanize the world. And if our faith has any meaning, it is to be related to life in all its complexity. Thousands of people think that necessary changes come only from outside, from revolutions and change in external conditions. It is for us Christians to prove that in reality everything comes from *inside*—from faith and life according to faith. The Church, when she entered the Greco-Roman world, did not denounce slavery, did not call for a revolution. It was her faith, her new vision of man and life that progressively made slavery impossible. One "saint"—and saint here means very simply a man taking his faith seriously all the time—will do more for changing the world than a thousand printed programs. The saint is the only true revolutionary in this world.

Finally, and this is our last general remark, Lent is the time to control our speech. Our world is incredibly verbal and we are constantly flooded by words which have lost their meaning and therefore their power. Christianity reveals the sacredness of the word—a truly divine gift to man. For this reason our speech is endowed with tremendous power either positive or negative. For this reason also we shall be judged on our words: "But I say unto you, that every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment. For by thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned" (Matt. 12:36-37). To control speech is to recover its seriousness and its sacredness, to understand that sometimes an innocent "joke," which we proffered without even thinking about it, can have disastrous results—can be that last "straw" which pushes a man into ultimate despair and destruction. But the word can also be a witness. A casual conversation across the desk with a colleague can do more for communicating a vision of life, an attitude toward other men or toward work, than formal preaching. It can sow the seeds of a question, of the possibility of a different approach to life, the desire to know more. We have no idea how,

in fact, we constantly influence one another by our words, by the very "tonality" of our personality. And ultimately men are converted to God not because someone was able to give brilliant explanations, but because they saw in him that light, joy, depth, seriousness, and love which alone reveal the presence and the power of God in the world.

And thus if Lent is, as we have said at the very beginning, the recovery by man of his faith, it is also his recovery of life, of its divine meaning, of its sacred depth. It is by abstaining from food that we rediscover its sweetness and learn again how to receive it from God with joy and gratitude. It is by "slowing down" on music and entertainment, on conversation and superficial socializing, that we rediscover the ultimate value of human relationships, human work, human art. And we rediscover all this because very simply we *rediscover God Himself*—because we return to Him and in Him to all that which He gave us in His infinite love and mercy.

And thus, on Easter night we sing:

> Today are all things filled with light,
> Heaven and earth and the places under the earth;
> All creation does celebrate the Resurrection of Christ
> On whom it is founded....

Of this expectation, do not deprive us, O Lover of Man!