

Archbishop Lori's Homily - Friday after Ash Wednesday

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MAC Mass

Baltimore Convention Center

Feb. 16, 2018

I am delighted to be with you this afternoon for the celebration of Holy Mass. And in case you didn't notice, it's Lent, thus the distinctly penitential tone of this liturgy. We might be tempted to say, "What a downer in the midst of an exciting Congress!" And there's no doubt about it: One author called Lent, "the somber season" and another (clearly a more upbeat person!) called it "a serious season". And that's what it was meant to be. Just speaking for myself, let me say that this season of repentance is something I really need. I hope you feel the same way too. Lent is preeminently a season of hope.

It's also that time when we dig a little deeper, isn't it? The noted Jesuit theologian, Michael Buckley, recounts a conversation he had with a farmer in the state of Oklahoma. The farmer was showing him a new kind of plow capable of digging more effectively through the thick layer of dry and hardened clay that covered over the rich and fertile top soil that lay beneath. Father Buckley used the clay as an image for the lives of people like me who are deeply involved in the ministry of the Church.

It may be true that we have dedicated our lives to the service of the Church, whether by ordination, the consecrated life, or various forms of lay ministry. But that does not mean that seed of God's Word has yet reached the fertile soil of our hearts, the good soil where the Word can sprout, grow, and bear the abundant fruit of the Gospel. Sometimes the Word of God encounters an impenetrable overlay on our hearts, like the dry, hard, thick clay found on the American prairie. For some, this thick layer of clay might be self-righteousness, an attitude that we have attained a superiority in discipleship, that our theology is better than that of others, that we are more effective than our peers, that somehow we are holier than they. For others, this thick layer might consist of cynicism and disappointment about leadership in the

Church – our bishop, our pastor, our religious superior – This is not to say that we do not need honest conversations about leadership – we do. But these conversations are not an excuse for any of us to lag in authentic discipleship. For still others, this thick layer might be apathy toward change or an inflated contentment with doing things the way we’ve always done them. Also mixed in with this clay can be an attitude that things will never change, they’ll never get better, that the Church is destined to suffer a slow decline as the years roll on... a perspective that discounts the efficacy of the Holy Spirit in our times!

So we come to this serious season of Lent full of hope, with a deep desire for change in our own lives, our own hearts, conscious that we cannot be effective ministers of the Kingdom if that Kingdom is not progressively dawning within our own hearts; conscious that in the name of serving the Church we might indeed be impeding the Kingdom. Who and what will help us dig up this thick layer of clay so that in God’s grace we might unearth the fertile soil of our hearts?

So let me take Father Buckley’s image a step further. The plow that was given to us by Christ in the Spirit, the one that is capable of digging through our clay is the discipline of Lent. This is not a new or innovative plow but one that is time-tested by the saints, namely, fasting, prayer, and almsgiving – all of which, in one way or another, are on display in today’s Scriptures. It’s my contention that, for this ‘spiritual’ plow to be effective, all three blades—fasting, prayer, and works of mercy – must cut in unison; that one without the others is incapable of cutting through our clay.

But someone might say to me, “Wait a minute. Re-read Isaiah! Doesn’t the prophet tell us that the Lord wants mercy instead of fasting? Doesn’t the Lord decry our donning sackcloth and ashes? ...going around with gloomy faces? ...starving ourselves while ignoring those who go without?” Well, I must say I grew up on an interpretation of Isaiah that did indeed discount mortification while emphasizing the works of mercy. And just a few days ago, on Ash Wednesday in fact, someone said to me, “I’m not giving up anything for Lent; I’ll just do some good for others!” Sad to say, that just doesn’t cut it.

Neither Isaiah nor Jesus nor the Church teaches that we don’t need to fast. Isaiah

did not say that we should not fast or do bodily penance for our sins. Rather he taught that fasting, sackcloth, and ashes are displeasing to God so long as we continue to oppress the poor or treat them with indifference. Jesus did not say we shouldn't fast – he himself fasted, 40 days and 40 nights. In tonight's Gospel Jesus foretells that his followers will fast “when the Bridegroom is gone” – that is to say – when he undergoes his Passion.

And what about the Church? What does the Church teach about this? Here, I'd like to call on the saintly 5th century Bishop of Ravenna, St. Peter Chrysologus, to represent the Tradition: “Fasting” he writes “is the soul of prayer. Almsgiving is the lifeblood of fasting. Let no one try to separate them; they cannot be separated. If you have only one of them or not all [of them] together, you have nothing. So if you pray, fast; if you fast, show mercy; if you want your petition to be heard, hear the petition of others. If you do not close your ear to others, you open God's ear to yourself.” A dose of spiritual realism from a bishop of eloquence and wisdom! All three blades must act in unison to cut through our clay!

During these days of the Mid-Atlantic Congress, I hope you are being inspired, energized, encouraged, and informed by the speakers, workshops, interactions with peers, dialogues and discussions, and an amazing array of publications and resources. I hope too that you are enjoying the City of Baltimore which, for all its challenges, is a wonderful place I'm proud to call home. It is also my hope and prayer that you and I are finding in MAC and in Baltimore a pretty good place to launch the season of Lent... such that we will return to our ministries with heart and mine renewed, such that the seed of God's Word will fall onto the fertile ground – the fertile ground of our hearts, our parishes, our varied ministries – and produce a harvest of holiness and joy as we welcome new members into our Church and prepare to celebrate the Paschal Mystery as never before.

May God bless us and keep us always in his love!