

# Archbishop Lori's Talk - Malta Lenten Day of Recollection

*Malta Lenten Day of Recollection*

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Michael Buckley, an eminent Jesuit theologian, tells of his conversation with an Oklahoma farmer. Years of hard work were etched in that man's rough-hewn face and the dust of the prairie had embedded itself in his overalls. The farmer confided to the theologian that because of drought and erosion, he had almost given up on his land and thus was in danger of losing his farm. Every year he and his brothers would plow the land and every year the land seemed to produce less and less. Beneath the topsoil was a layer of hard clay and rock. The moisture received from rainfall or from irrigation ran off and, as a result, his fields were turning into dust.

The farmer and his brothers, however, were smart men. They abandoned their tractors and disks, and instead built a plow with an outside blade that would cut deep into the earth. This massive metal plow could cut deep into the earth, reaching beneath the clay, breaking up the clods into smaller pieces, easing the moisture that lay beneath and allowing rainwater and irrigation to sink into the soil. Once he figured out how to plow up the thick layer of clay and rock, he was able to reach the good soil that was open to seed, water, and nourishment – and thus land that had once been barren began to yield a rich harvest. In describing matter-of-factly the art of farming on the Oklahoma prairie, the farmer gave the theologian a modern-day version of Jesus' parable of the sower and the seed.

The overlay of dry, lifeless clay and rock is an apt metaphor of our need for ongoing conversion – both as individuals and as communities of faith. Like the Oklahoma farmer who used giant tractors and disks to till the soil, the Church's pastors constantly till the soil of our hearts and of our culture, using the best, most up-to-date biblical commentaries, employing pastoral practices that are both time-tested and innovative, while harnessing modern technology to run their parishes and

ministries effectively. All this is done with considerable effort on the part of the pastor, his associate pastors, and his pastoral team – including parish counselors and volunteers. All this and more also is considered *de rigueur* if we are to be faithful to the renewal of the Church mandated by the II Vatican Council and by the pastoral directives of popes and bishops.

Yet, like the Oklahoma farmer, the pastors of the Church, and I am speaking of myself as much as of anyone – we pastors find that just beneath the topsoil of our hearts and the topsoil of the people whom we are privileged to serve – there is a thick layer of hardened clay and rock blocking both seed and moisture from above and trapping the good soil underneath. To repeat, we find this layer of clay and rock first in our own hearts but also in the hearts of individuals and whole communities. While such a metaphor may sound excessively judgmental, I'd ask you to bear with me as I try to describe and exemplify in what this thick layer of clay and rock consists and why it puts us and our church communities at risk.

Here Pope Francis has been the truth-teller in our midst. Other popes have spoken of the imperviousness of the human heart to God's love and of the unreceptiveness of church communities to the seed of God's Word. But Pope Francis puts it in terms that are stark, unrelenting, and to many, irritating – (I'll confess that sometimes I am among those who are irritated but that's what a prophetic word is supposed to do – irritate and upbraid!) Following Pope Francis' wise lead, we see this thick layer of clay and rock as an overlay on a church culture in need of reform and as an overlay on our individual hearts also in need of reform. Let us look at this collective and individual overlay in turn.

As I already mentioned, many people – clergy, religious, laity – labor with untold dedication in the field of the Church. Yet, they find it difficult to get beyond the layers of clerical culture which has nothing to do with a healthy sense of priestly identity but everything to do with a priest's or bishop's feeling empowered and entitled at the expense of those whom he is supposed to be serving. Believe it or not, the same sort of clerical entitlement is an occupational hazard not only for the ordained clergy but also for lay persons in church ministry and for those who are counselors and volunteers . . . entitlement lurks. The Pope refers to this as spiritual worldliness. It is doing good things in the life of the Church for one's own benefit –

either as merely a way of making a living or as a path to prestige or power. Coupled with that layer of hard clay are the rocks of resentment and jealousy in church communities that are supposed to be all about faith, worship, and service. Add to that a layer of cynicism that things will never change or get better, that the Church is headed inevitably for a long, slow and painful decline. This is not to be confused with trust in God's providential care for his Church amid the ups and downs, indeed the vagaries of her journey through history. It really is a hard cynicism that betrays a lack of Christian hope and gives people cause to leave the Church . . . for if they want cynicism, they can find it abundantly elsewhere. Then, a further layer covering the good soil is an excessive trust in our own efforts, in our ingenuity, our cleverness, our goodness - coupled with a failure to acknowledge God's greatness and our dependence upon him. All this and more constitutes that thick layer rendering church communities impervious to the gifts of nature and grace which the Spirit of God pours forth with lavish abundance.

What does this layer of clay and rock look like in us individually? The answer to that question will vary from person to person but I think, drawing from my own need of redemption, I can offer a general idea. For many people, there are habitual sins that seem impervious to grace. It might be a bad temper; it might be pride; it might be a disordered appetite - these are just some of the sins we seem to wrestle with our whole life long. For others, it might be a sin from the past with its layer of guilt, a barrier that makes us think that God really does not love us. For still others, the impervious layer might be persistent doubts - doubts about God's love, about his providential care in the face of tragedy. These things, it seems to me, are not too far below the topsoil and in the main we are keenly aware of them. Yet there are deeper layers of clay and rock beneath the surface of our hearts, attitudes that we harbor but scarcely ever bring to the surface - attitudes of superiority toward others, unresolved grudges and resentments, pretensions to goodness, virtue, holiness and generosity - the good face we show to the world as opposed to how we really are. All this and more constitute the layer of clay and rock that can surround our hearts and make it difficult for even God's choicest graces to overtake us and convert us.

Any day is a good day for a profound conversion of mind and heart - but I would submit that the Lord, through the Church, gives us the season of Lent so that we might dig deeper into those layers of clay and rock, those sins and sinful attitudes,

even those that remain hidden from our purview. All of which brings me back to the Oklahoma farmer.

If you recall, this farmer and his family had a moment when they faced facts. They could see that their land was drying up, in danger of turning to infertile dust. They could see that their harvest was growing smaller every year. And they could see that doing business as usual wasn't working. They had the best tractor and the finest disks but neither the tractor nor the disks was digging deep enough. And so they resorted to a plow (pulled by mules no less) that was big enough and sharp enough to penetrate the clay and rocks, break up the clods, and reach fertile soil that lay beneath. All this involved a fundamental change in how they approached their work: it entailed a new kind of discipline, a new measure of sweat equity, and, no doubt, it involved a certain amount of risk. Yet, the farmer and his family realized that unless something changed, they'd soon be out of business, so they were willing to try it.

What an apt metaphor for us! In the hearts of many individuals and in the heart of the Church's pastors, there is a growing realization that business as usual is no longer working; it is no longer succeeding in bringing the unchurched to Christ. We are rightly alarmed at the rising number of people who declare themselves to be atheists and agnostics. Many people consider themselves spiritual but not religious and spurn any form of institutionalized religion. We can see this in our families. So often good parents speak to me about their children, often millennials, who feel they have failed because their children not only do not go to church but also reject the Church itself as out of touch and hypocritical. Many people consider themselves good Catholics but they take a decidedly casual approach to the faith - especially Sunday Mass - feeling that if they enroll their children in a Catholic school or bring them to religious education classes - they've done their duty toward God and the Church, and that's that! We may see them at Christmas and Easter but otherwise quite seldom. These are symptoms of the fact that religion is far less influential than it was in the lives of many people and in the life of the culture itself. Add to that the discontent we so often feel about our own life of faith, about the condition of our hearts, about our distance from God and others. We are like those Oklahoma farmers who survey the landscape and wonder if all we hold near and dear isn't about to turn to dust.

Which is exactly where we began on Ash Wednesday: “Remember that you are dust and unto dust you shall return!” Those words are a challenge for you and me to dig deeper, to dig for that good soil where the seeds of God’s Word can be planted and grow. And with what shall we dig? What is the special plow that is big enough and sharp enough to cut through the clay and rock that covers over our hearts and even the culture of our beloved Church? And if we find this plow, where should we start plowing?

Let me begin with the last question first. To break down the clay and rock that renders us unfruitful, we must begin first with our own hearts and our own families... so that the Church herself can be fruitful. Each of us, myself included, must heed the call to conversion. Each of us must allow that conversion to be thorough and deep, not omitting or avoiding any sin or attitude that blocks out the Lord’s presence in us. Each of us must share this conversion process with our spouses, family, and friends, for often the Gospel spreads not from the top but at the grassroots level.

So what then is that special Lenten plow? You will be disappointed to learn that, unlike the Oklahoma farmer, I did not have the ingenuity to invent a new plow but I hope I have the integrity to suggest the only one that really works, the only one that can cut through the layers of rock and clay that accumulate in our hearts and in our communities - viz., prayer, fasting, and almsgiving - that is - works of mercy. This is the plow the Lord has fashioned and put in our hands not only in Lent but throughout our lives. A word about each “blade” of this tripartite plow - offered in the realization that the plow doesn’t work unless all the blades cut in unison!

Beginning with prayer . . . prayer of repentance. There are basic forms of prayer and many styles of prayer but in Lent the principal form of prayer is to ask forgiveness of our sins; it is the prayer of heart that is “contrite and humbled” - as Ps. 51 puts it: “a humble contrite heart, O God, you will not spurn.” The word “contrite” surely means we are genuinely sorry for our sins but the origins of this word also has something to say to us. For its Latin and Old French roots have to do with being crushed and ground down, giving us a sense that we should be crushed in spirit with sorrow for our sins, that our hearts should be broken. The prayer of Lent - both public (liturgical) and private, should be for a conversation in which we present ourselves

to the Lord as we really are, asking the Lord to help us see ourselves as he sees us, and then asking him to break down our hardness of heart, breaking up the clods of overt sin and those subtle temptations to glorify ourselves. The great secret of evil in our hearts and in the life of the Church itself is often a corruption of the good that we are called to do – a subtle temptation to do good things for the sake of public approval, followed by bitterness when our goodness is underappreciated or unnoticed. Discerning prayer, searching prayer, alone with the Lord in the silence of our hearts helps us reach this level of repentance in our lives and then to make use of the Sacrament of Reconciliation not in a routine way but in a way that penetrates, cuts deep into our hearts.

This is something that we do as individuals – but it is also something that we must do as a church community – we must be and be seen as a community of repentance. We express this in the Mass – the readings, the prayers, the liturgical music but we also express it when there are lines for confession, when penance services are well-attended, when a critical number of parishioners spend quality time each in prayer – allowing the Lord’s heart to speak to their hearts (yes, the Lord does speak to us!) Parishes can put in all the programs of evangelization that they want but unless the priest and a critical mass of his people have humble, contrite hearts, the seed of God’s Word will be there, it will be full of power and goodness, but it will be unable to sprout and grow for lack of good soil, water, and nutrients. As one author put it, we have to be weak enough, dependent enough, for service. We need to have a humble sense of our need for God’s forgiveness and for his sustaining help in all that we do. Prayer is the first and indispensable blade of our Lenten plow.

A second blade of our Lenten plow is fasting, bodily mortification. Lest we think it is merely optional, all we have to do is to read the liturgical prayers for Lent. Almost every day they speak about bodily self-denial, usually in the form of abstaining from food, drink, or some other legitimate pleasure. And this sort of penitential practice has largely faded from view.

I must confess how I fall short in this department. Often my Lenten resolutions are about as enduring as my New Year’s resolutions. I think about how hard the day was; I recall what an errant spiritual director told me, viz., your job is so hard that you’re doing penance all the time...so easy to be deceived. I recall as well a view

that was very popular when I was young. The Church's mandatory laws of fasting and abstinence had just been changed and most people stopped fasting altogether in Lent. It was often said, "Well, you don't have to give up anything - just be sure you are helping the poor and needy." ...That doesn't ring quite true, does it? The Lord himself fasted and prayed so it's hard to see how we'd be exempt. For the efficacy of fasting lies in the connectedness of body and soul, a reality which God uses to reach down into the depth of our being. The pangs of hunger and the thirst for a cocktail or the longing for an infusion of sugar all have a way of cutting into us, not merely our bodies, but also our spirits. They have a way of breaking up the clay of our sinful self-indulgence and simultaneously creating a new openness in our hearts for God's love. The blade of fasting is particularly sharp and reaches down to the good top soil of our hearts.

The final blade in the Lenten plow is almsgiving, works of mercy offered humbly and sincerely to the poor and vulnerable, without any trace of noblesse oblige. Perhaps this is where the Order of Malta shines the brightest but even here Lent should give us a deeper perspective. For in opening our hearts to the needs of others, is it not the case that our own hearts are softened? Many of you have had the experience of ministering to malades. In witnessing their deep faith and their patient acceptance of suffering, somehow our sense of entitlement and our complaints, our pride - are all cut to the quick by those whom we set out to serve. It's not just that they help us put our own sufferings in perspective; they also touch our hearts deeply, opening them to God's love in a way that few other experiences can do. How often I've visited a parishioner in the hospital thinking I'd offer cheer and spiritual strength but returning only to find that it was the parishioner whose faith and goodness amazed me and turned my gaze towards God. A fortiori, when I hear confessions, the immensity of God's mercy dawns upon me... his mercy for the penitents I serve and his mercy for me.

It doesn't always work that way, of course, because the love we offer others is not always requited. Indeed the saints teach us the value of serving others, even when what we offer is rejected, even when we ourselves are rejected. For that experience too, digs through that layer of egotism that demands recognition, appreciation, and consolation from God. It also gives us some small idea of how often God's love is rejected or neglected.

I would ask that we draw one last lesson from the Oklahoma farmer's plow, namely, that all the blades have to work in union to cut through the clay. If the farmer had used his plow in any other than it was designed, it would have been ineffective and his farm would not have produced good fruit. So, prayer, fasting, and works of mercy – all work together to reach the good soil. But don't take it from me; take it from St. Peter Chrysologus, the saintly 5<sup>th</sup> century Bishop of Ravenna, to whom I give the last word.

"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." May you have a most blessed Lent and a most joyous Easter!