

Fasting and Mercy

By Jennifer Gregory Miller Mar 13, 2015

The theme of conversion is a thread that runs all through Lent, but conversion takes on different aspects throughout the phases of Lent. The first two and a half weeks focused on the interior turning of hearts; the liturgy urges the faithful to reflect and examine consciences thoroughly. The second phase, Weeks Three, Four and Five, focus on baptism. For those already baptized, the time is spent recalling our baptism and trying to "put on Christ" by imitation of Christ.

One main area of imitation of Christ especially during Lent is His mercy. One of my Lenten daily readings is the book *Roman Pilgrimage: The Station Churches* by George Weigel. I reviewed the book last year near the end of Lent, but this year I'm enjoying reading it through the entire Lenten season. (I highly recommend the book as a source of meditation for the liturgy, both Mass readings and the Divine Office, tied in with the Roman Stational Churches. There are so few books that balance the current calendar and lectionary with meditations, incorporating the ancient Catholic traditions of Rome makes this book most unique..) It is George Weigel who really stresses these different aspects of conversion, and also the importance of mercy in our imitation of Christ. This Tuesday I was a bit zinged by his remark (emphasis mine):

Fifteen hundred years *before the Lenten fast became transformed, in some minds, into a weight-loss program*, Peter Chrysologus was counseling his people against any such confusions, which mistake righteousness-through-works for true conversion... (*Roman Pilgrimage*, pp. 162-163).

This hits very close to home. I gave up certain foods and took on a healthy approach to eating thinking my main intention was for Lent and self-denial. But as the weeks progress and the scale doesn't budge and my cravings don't disappear, I'm getting discouraged. I've been feeling like this whole fasting thing isn't working. Those thoughts are a reflection of my mixed-up intentions and priorities. Weigel quotes from the sermon by St. Peter Chrysologus, which was excerpted in the Office of Readings on Tuesday, which provides the proper attitude toward fasting and mercy:

...Prayer, mercy and fasting: these three are one, and they give life to each other.

Fasting is the soul of prayer, mercy 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 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.

When you fast, see the fasting of others. If you want God to know that you are hungry, know that another is hungry. If you hope for mercy, show mercy. If you look for kindness, show kindness. If you want to receive, give. If you ask for yourself what you deny to others, your asking is a mockery.

Let this be the pattern for all men when they practise mercy: show mercy to others in the same way, with the same generosity, with the same promptness, as you want others to show mercy to you....

Fasting bears no fruit unless it is watered by mercy. Fasting dries up when mercy dries up. Mercy is to fasting as rain is to earth. However much you may cultivate your heart, clear the soil of your nature, root out vices, sow virtues, if you do not release the springs of mercy, your fasting will bear no fruit....

My fasting should not make me gaze only inward on my feelings, my hunger, my scale and my waistline. Yes, it should help in rooting out my personal failings, but that's after I embrace true fasting, which turns my eyes outward on the needs of others. By practicing mercy towards others will bring a rich and bountiful harvest of graces for them and me.

The timing of the Holy Father's announcement for a Jubilee Year of Mercy opening December 8 of this year and closing November 20, 2016 is not lost on me. As I am contemplating practicing mercy, the Holy Father provides a whole year of special graces to deepen my understanding and grow rich in His mercy.

My imitation of Christ must include mercy, both as a recipient and a giver. I will be shifting my fasting from the inward focus and turning outward in mercy towards others. "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful" (cf. Lk 6:36).