

Lenten Pastoral 1920

TO THE FAITHFUL IN CHRIST JESUS IN THE DIOCESE OF GEORGIA.

Brethren:

The near approach of the Season of Lent, leads me to send you a few words of affectionate counsel, which I trust may prove helpful to you in the supreme concern of your soul's salvation.

I desire, first, to acknowledge the encouragement which your generous response to the Church's call in the Nation-Wide Campaign has given me. While it is true that the Diocese has not yet reached the goal set by the quota assigned, still so much has been accomplished in larger gifts to the Church's support and in increased personal loyalty evinced by many that I feel that both individually and as a Church we have received a great benediction and are entering upon a larger life of service and devotion.

This Campaign is but the beginning, we hope, of a new and richer life of ministry to the world; and what we have so well begun, we shall by God's grace carry on year by year. May we all learn by experience the truth of the words of our Lord that "it is more blessed to give than to receive;" to minister than to be ministered unto.

But at the beginning of the holy season I commend to you the blessed duty of greater loyalty to our Lord through obedience to the guidance and directions of His Church. The Church has had experience through many centuries in the nurture of souls. When she speaks it is with the wisdom of God's Spirit certified by her long experience. Her regimen of life for our nurture in grace commands our reverent compliance. The helpfulness of her Lenten discipline has been verified in the spiritual experience of millions, in the manifested holiness of the Saints. In observing Lent, we are, also, following in the footsteps of our Lord, as he kept His Lent in the wilderness. We pray to Him, "who for our sakes did fast forty days and forty nights," that we may use such abstinence that our flesh, being subdued to the Spirit, we may ever obey his godly motions in righteousness and true holiness." We cannot surely do better than to follow Him. If it was necessary for Him, how much more so for us.

When the Church, therefore, enjoins upon us "such a measure of abstinence as is more especially suited to extraordinary acts and exercises of devotion" we should recognize the value and wisdom of her injunction and endeavor to obey them.

The Church bids us "exercise a measure of abstinence," to exercise a greater self discipline, to keep under our bodies and subject them unto the obedience of Christ.

St. Paul's speaks of "crucifying the flesh and its affections and lusts." This is strong language. It was the language of a strong man. Life is a stern business. To live nobly requires "hardness." As the soldier and athlete must "harden" themselves; so we must "harden" our spiritual fibre. We must have a high purpose, a firm-set will and an unwavering loyalty to duty. We must be willing and able to

make sacrifices necessary for self control over our bodily and worldly affections. This is to enjoy the freedom wherewith Christ has set us free.

I, therefore, call upon you, as your Bishop and Pastor, to practise abstinence, to fast, to cut out even such lawful practices as may be liable to bring you into bondage, and to suffocate your souls in a soft self-indulgence.

We are told that men and women are at this time indulging in a riot of extravagance and self-indulgence. This may be a reaction from the stern restraints imposed upon us by the war. But such reaction is a foolish extravagance of unreason. Much that we are now suffering from is its consequences. Would that the spirit of self-forgetting sacrifice which many exhibited when country and humanity appealed to them could be accepted as the normal and true law of life in peace as well as in war. Brethren, we must find in our Saviour's life and character the ideal and principle of our own lives and with grateful joy discipline ourselves, bodies and wills, into his obedient service. For that purpose therefore, I bid you practice self-denial and abstinence.

2. But "the measure of abstinence is to give opportunity for 'extraordinary acts of devotion.'" Self-discipline is of no value in itself. It is only valuable to enable us to find God, to commune with Him, to learn and do His will, and to find in love and obedience to Him blessedness and eternal life. Only thus can we justly value life. False valuations by perverting life bring sorrow and loss, as we are learning today only too bitterly. Life estimated in the terms of things which can be measured and weighed drives from our minds and hearts the thought and love of things spiritual and eternal. We must live more in God and for God and the things of God, if we would not lose our souls.

And so I urge you reverently to determine for yourself some definite rule of Lenten observance. Such a rule or plan is necessary to strengthen our wills, to steady our fluctuating purpose. Do not make your rule too easy. Do not deceive yourselves by soft compromises. We cannot deceive God. Be honest. Be persistent and consistent, loyal to your own purpose. Carry out your rule without deviation. Be suspicious of excuses made to yourself when your rule of discipline becomes inconvenient or painful. Cultivate your spirit in the habits and practices of devotion.

Examine yourself with courageous honesty, that you may know yourself, your weaknesses and faults and sins. Be straightforward in confession both in private and in public. The Saviour said "I came not to call the righteous but sinners to repentance." Do you recognize that His call is to you? If so, what are your besetting sins, of thought, motive, temper, word, deed and habit? Sin is not only an act or a word or a thought. It is spiritual disease and permeates the whole being, it enfeebles the will and paralyzes the soul. Pursue confession into repentance, repentance into the will for holiness, and amendment of life.

Set apart some portion of each day for devotion and be faithful to it. Use some simple book of prayer and devotion as a guide to prayer and meditation. Read your Bible every day with conscientiousness, according to some plan, the daily lessons, for instance. If your Bible is dust covered, mislaid and forgotten, what a blessing this Lent will be to you, if by patient effort you can discover or rediscover its blessed truth and find it to be a Word of God to your soul. Pray before reading it; pray after reading it.

Above all, meditate upon what you read. Think about it. Let God's Word interpret your experience and interpret it in turn by your experience. No life can be spiritually strong without meditation and there can be no meditation without leisure. Men and women need nothing more in this day than retirement and quiet and meditation. We are hurrying and pressing and dissipating life in an

exaggerated sense of the supreme value of activity. Life is indeed action and conduct, doing things. Character expresses itself in conduct. But not all activity expresses character. Sometimes it is the evidence of the lack of character, simply motion without force or direction, without will, and without aim. "As a man thinketh, so is he." But if a man does not think, what is he?

The Blessed Lord commended Mary and lovingly rebuked Martha. The Marys and Marthas are ever with us. Both temperaments under God's grace can render acceptable service. But now there seem to be many Marthas and few Marys and Martha is still complaining of Mary. But the Marys have found, somehow, the thing that Martha misses and needs.

And so I urge you to set apart during this Lent some hour each day and with your Bible and your meditation and prayer enter into the Great Presence and reinforce your characters with His truth, His love and His life. The great need today is devotion in religion and in life, the religion of devotion and personal communion with God.

But I do not commend to you the practice of an exclusively cloistered religion. For to all is given the capacity and need of fellowship and mutual service. We are members one of another, brethren in the household of God. We are members of His Holy Catholic Church, the Body of Christ, the spiritual new Jerusalem which is the "Mother of us all." And therefore, as we must live together and work together, so we must pray and worship together. Therefore, determine now at the beginning of Lent that you will subordinate your pleasure to the privilege of prayer in the worship of the Church. Set apart days and hours to be present at some, if not all, of the Sunday and the special Lenten services. Make the sacrifice necessary to do so. Is your soul and your duty to God and man not worth the sacrifice? And, especially, be frequently at the altar in Holy Communion with your Lord.

And not only yourselves, but your children and others whom you can and ought to influence. You do not want to go to heaven alone and without your children. You owe them bodily care and nurture. You are solicitous for their health. You also owe their souls spiritual nurture. And do you not care for their souls' health and salvation? Read again the conclusion of the baptismal service and do your duty.

And finally, brethren, be mindful of the grace of almsgiving or, better, justice. Practice self-denial that you may have wherewith to bless others. Practice plain living and high thinking—the high thinking that will make you free and just and generous and abounding in the love which gives self and substance for Christ's dear sake and for those whom by our ministry of service we may bless in His name.

And may God find you in your innermost self, dwell in you for ever and transform you into His likeness for Christ's sake. Amen.

Sincerely your friend and Bishop,

FREDERICK F. REESE.

The clergy will please read this pastoral letter to their congregations at morning service on Quinquagesima Sunday or the First Sunday in Lent and also have the copies distributed among the members of their congregations.

FREDERICK F. REESE.

Savannah, Ga., February 12, 1920.