

## Lent V

Any good plan to combat the predominant fault will include things that are positive, and things that are negative. Knowing the fault and our lesser sins, will be the result of a good examination of conscience. "This is the very perfection of a man, to find out his own imperfections." (St. Augustine) Among the negative means of combating the fault is of course fasting, and not just from food. Michael Warren Davis has this to say about social media.

As I've written elsewhere, social media is designed to be addictive. Like slot machines, we get hooked on the loop of instant gratification. The user begins to crave likes on his photos and comments on his posts. Pretty soon, our powers of judgment have been compromised, and the sites themselves become the near occasion of a whole host of sins. On a platform like Facebook, which allows us to curate an "ideal self" for our friends and family, it might be pride. On Instagram, which trades in selfies, it could be lust. On Twitter, it's probably wrath.

All the while, these apps are blunting our attention span. It becomes more and more difficult to sit quietly, or to read a book, or even hold a conversation. Our brains itch for the endless and various distractions that only exist on the internet. How are we meant to pray, or read Scripture, or just take a few minutes to be alone with God?

For the positive things to do, I'd put going to confession as number one, regular and daily prayer as number two, good recreation as number three, and meditation number four, in order of importance. When someone is slipping into the same sins over and over, you'll find one if not all four of these things missing.

Take a lesson from the *Divine Comedy* of Dante. At the beginning of the *Inferno*, he finds himself in a strange and terrible wilderness and says "How I arrived there, it were hard to tell, so weary was my mind, so filled with sleep, I reeled and wandered from the path of truth." What kind of sleep is this that makes a man wander from the path of truth? It is the sluggish torpor of sin, which makes the intellect cloudy and enfeebles the will. He comes to his senses and tries to climb up again to the mountain of God, but blocking his path is a leopard, a lion, and a ravenous she-wolf. These represent the world, the flesh, and the devil. And he knows that he cannot overcome them. "The she-wolf stood beside him, gaunt and grim, whose leanness showed her hunger unappeased, though many she had caused to live in woe. So heavily she bore my spirits down with terror which her very aspect caused, that I lost hope of making the ascent." I think of the she-wolf as being the predominant fault.

That is everyman. He is frozen with fear to overcome his sins. And so he cries out for help, because he is stuck and he knows it. He wants to change at some level, but does not change. The fear is there, even great fear, because he realizes that he has abandoned God by his repeated sin.

But God has not abandoned him. He sends Dante help, but to Dante's surprise the help is arranged by a great Lady in heaven, and the help she sends is a pagan, the greatest of pagan poets, Virgil. Encouraged, Dante thinks that surely, a man as wise as Virgil will know the way around the beasts to get back to climbing upward. Indeed, Virgil does know the way. But it is not by getting back on the same path and trying to ascend. Rather, the only way out of this predicament for Dante is down and in; down that is, down into the depths of hell, so that he may see sin for what it really is, and learn of its punishments. Virgil says, "I shall be your guide to lead you hence through that eternal place

where you shall hear despairing cries of woe, and see the ancient spirits in their grief proclaiming they have died a second death.”

The long meditation on hell which is the *Inferno* is the path that must be taken. And after that, the sinner needs to take a long hard look at purgatory and heaven as well. These too are missing from the soul which finds itself attached to the predominant fault and has seen little progress.

As to how to meditate; that is the subject of books, or a whole other series of articles. But the good news is that anyone can do it. We need to fix our eyes on Christ, and keep them there. So simple! But hard isn't it? Just ask St. Peter who sank into the waves when he took his eyes off of Christ on the Sea of Galilee. To keep our eyes on Christ means taking time each day to pray in silence. What do you do in the silence? Ask God where He is present in your life. If you do this, you will discover that you have much misery in your life. What is misery? It is the absence of love. What is the cause? Perhaps someone has injured you. They either were not there when you needed them, or they were there when you didn't want them. Perhaps it is your own sins.

But St. Elizabeth of the Trinity said to go into those abysses of misery with faith. Don't run away from them. Ask God where He is in this. You will see the abyss of misery at first, but if you search, you will find the deeper abyss of God's mercy. That's what Elizabeth was doing even as a little girl. She searched for mercy which in Latin is *misericordia*, or mercy from the heart.

There is nothing in your life that God did not see, and ache over, and felt pain. Far more than you did. He ached over it so much that He sent His Son into the depths of your heart. Our misery is revealed on the cross. If we want that mercy to go to others, we need to go into that awful place in our lives and see God. Blessed are the merciful for they shall see mercy.

This prayer doesn't make the miseries go away. But it will mean that we are able to live with them by faith. St. Elizabeth said her mission in heaven will be to lead souls into this great silence that permits God to transform them into the image of Himself. We don't learn to live within ourselves by ourselves. This may only be done by faith. She wants to help you get there. It's not just her writings that will do this, it's her. Ask her to help. The communion of saints isn't just “St. Anthony find my stuff!” – it is a communion of friendship.