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EASTER
*W*ISDOM
—— *from* ——
THOMAS MERTON

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WISDOM
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THOMAS MERTON

Daily Scripture and Prayers Together
With Thomas Merton's Own Words

*The Merton Institute for Contemplative Living
Compiled by Jonathan Montaldo*



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Preface

WITHIN THE LARGE, varied corpus of Cistercian monk Thomas Merton, a few of his books are overlooked. A gem that deserves review is *Seasons of Celebration*, a gathering of his meditations on the meaning of the sacred liturgy for the spiritual daily lives of Roman Catholic Christians. To highlight for readers the perennial value of these reflections, both for the quality of their spiritual instruction and for the beautifully expressed intuitions studded throughout, the readings in this text for Lent and Easter have been harvested from this one volume.

Merton wrote these collected fifteen essays between 1950 and 1964. His noninclusive language, although traditional in his time, grates on the ears of twenty-first-century readers, but the Merton Legacy Trust rightfully urges editors to publish his works as he wrote them. Merton needs no defense: he possessed one of the most inclusive minds and hearts among spiritual writers of his historical period. He always referred to the “human being” or “person” when he wrote generally of “man.” If he could revise his work today, he would undoubtedly modify his language to more gracefully address everyone. Merton’s writing always communicates his kinship, respect, and even love for all of us.

One of Thomas Merton’s most consistent spiritual and literary exercises was writing journals. He believed that God was intimate to his most personal experiences, especially when he reflected upon and recorded them. And at the end of the day, Merton judged his journal writing to be his best. Thus it seems



appropriate for this volume that the “Lenten Journal” portion of each day consist of suggestions to assist you in keeping a private journal of this season of your life in Christ. Whether your journal is a spiral notebook or pages bound in leather, you are invited to create a personal book of your journey through Lent and Easter (where everything is allowed to go) as you celebrate Eucharist, hear and do the word of God, and discern whatever wisdom you discover for your own life in the words of Thomas Merton.

JONATHAN MONTALDO

ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR

MERTON INSTITUTE FOR CONTEMPLATIVE LIVING



Introduction

MOST CATHOLICS SEEM to be aware that the forty-day period before the feast of Easter, Lent—which comes from the Anglo-Saxon word *lencten*, meaning “spring”—is a time marked by particular rituals, such as the reception of ashes on Ash Wednesday or the practice of fasting and almsgiving. What is the significance of these rituals, and how do we observe the Lenten season today?

A BRIEF HISTORY OF LENT

In the first three centuries of Christian experience, preparation for the Easter feast usually covered a period of one or two days, perhaps a week at the most. Saint Irenaeus of Lyons (ca. AD 140–202) even speaks of a *forty-hour* preparation for Easter.

The first reference to Lent as a period of forty days’ preparation occurs in the teachings of the First Council of Nicaea in AD 325. By the end of the fourth century, a Lenten period of forty days was established and accepted.

In its early development, Lent quickly became associated with the sacrament of baptism, since Easter was the great baptismal feast. Those who were preparing to be baptized participated in the season of Lent in preparation for the reception of the sacrament of baptism. Eventually, those who were already baptized considered it important to join these candidates preparing for baptism in their preparations for Easter. The customs and practices of Lent, as we know them today, soon took hold.



LENT AS A JOURNEY

Lent is often portrayed as a journey, from one point in time to another point in time. The concept of journey is obvious for those experiencing the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA), a four-stage program of baptismal preparation that culminates during Lent and ends during the Easter Vigil.

But Lenten preparation is not limited to those who are preparing to be baptized and join the Church. For many Catholics, Lent is a journey that is measured from Ash Wednesday through Easter Sunday, but, more accurately, Lent is measured from Ash Wednesday to the beginning of the period known as the Triduum.

Triduum begins with the evening Mass of the Lord's Supper on Holy Thursday, reaches its high point in the Easter Vigil, and closes with the proclamation of the Exsultet, "Rejoice, O Heavenly Powers," during the Mass of Holy Saturday.

By whatever yardstick the journey is measured, it is not only the time that is important but the essential experiences of the journey that are necessary for a full appreciation of what is being celebrated.

The Lenten journey is also a process of spiritual growth and, as such, presumes movement from one state of being to another state. For example, some people may find themselves troubled and anxious at the beginning of Lent as a result of a life choice or an unanswered question, and, at the end of Lent, they may fully expect a sense of conversion, a sense of peace, or perhaps simply understanding and acceptance. Therefore, Lent is a movement from one point of view to another or, perhaps, from one interpretation of life to a different interpretation.

Scripture, psalms, prayers, rituals, practices, and penance are the components of the Lenten journey. Each component,



tried and tested by years of tradition, is one of the “engines” that drives the season and which brings the weary spiritual traveler to the joys of Easter.

PENITENTIAL NATURE OF LENT

A popular understanding of Lent is that it is a penitential period during which people attempt to become more sensitive to the role of sin in their lives. Lenten sermons will speak of personal sin, coming to an awareness of the sins of others and the effect such sin might have, and, finally, the sin that can be found within our larger society and culture. Awareness of sin, however, is balanced by an emphasis on the love and acceptance that God still has for humanity, despite the sinful condition in which we still find ourselves.

The practice of meditation of the passion of the Lord, his suffering, and his death is also seen as part of the penitential experience of Lent. There is also a traditional concern for the reception of the sacrament of reconciliation during Lent. Originally, the sacrament of reconciliation was celebrated before Lent began; the penance was imposed on Ash Wednesday, and performed during the entire forty-day period.

SUMMONS TO PENITENTIAL LIVING

“Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news’” (Mark 1:14–15). This call to conversion announces the solemn opening of Lent. Participants are marked with ashes, and the words “Repent, and believe in the good news” are prayed. This blessing is understood as a personal acceptance of the desire to take on the life of penance for the sake of the gospel.

The example of Jesus in the desert for forty days—a time during which he fasted and prayed—is imitated. It is time to center attention on conversion. During Lent, the expectation is to examine our lives and, through the practice of prayer, fasting, and works of charity, seeks to conform our lives to Christ's. For some, this conversion will be a turning from sin to grace. For others, it will be a gracious turning toward the mystery of God in Christ. Whatever the pattern chosen by a particular pilgrim for an observance of Lent, it is hoped that this book will provide a useful support in the effort.



PART I



READINGS *for*
LENT



DAY 1

Ash Wednesday

LENT IS OUR “HOLY SPRING”

Even the darkest moments of the liturgy are filled with joy, and Ash Wednesday, the beginning of the Lenten fast, is a day of happiness, a Christian feast. It cannot be otherwise, as it forms part of the great Easter cycle.

The Paschal Mystery is above all the mystery of life in which the Church, by celebrating the death and resurrection of Christ, enters into the Kingdom of Life which He has established once for all by His definitive victory over sin and death. We must remember the original meaning of Lent, as the *ver sacrum*, the Church’s “holy spring” in which the catechumens were prepared for their baptism, and public penitents were made ready by penance for their restoration to the sacramental life in a communion with the rest of the Church. Lent is then not a season of punishment so much as one of healing.

THOMAS MERTON, *SEASONS OF CELEBRATION*, 113

A SEASON OF CELEBRATION

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself....So we are ambassadors for Christ...we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. For he says,

*“At an acceptable time I have listened to you,
and on a day of salvation I have helped you.”*

See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!

2 CORINTHIANS 5:17—6:2

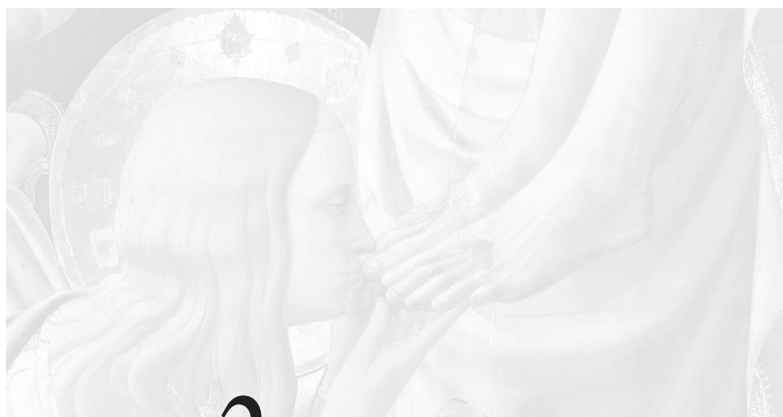
PRAYER

With faith in your resurrection, with hope in your power that undoes every death, I lift up my heart with love for you. Send forth your Holy Spirit who makes me more deeply your disciple. Crossing the threshold of this holy season, I renew my gratitude for the gift of being alive. On this Holy Wednesday, my forehead smeared with ashes, I accept my own death as holy: you have sanctified it. I offer my life and my death in thanksgiving to you, Jesus, the Christ, my Savior and my God.

LENTEN JOURNAL

However you write in your Lent and Easter journal, be truthful to your own experience. The question proposed for each day is only suggestive. Give your heart and mind free range. A first question: In what ways do you consider Lent to be a “season of celebration”?





DAY 2

Thursday After Ash Wednesday

A SORROW THAT BRINGS JOY

Compunction is a baptism of sorrow, in which the tears of the penitent are a psychological but also deeply religious purification, preparing and disposing him for the sacramental waters of baptism or for the sacrament of penance. Such sorrow brings joy because it is at once a mature acknowledgment of guilt and the acceptance of its full consequences: hence it implies a religious and moral adjustment to reality, the acceptance of one's actual condition. The acceptance of reality is always a liberation from the burden of illusion that we strive to justify by our errors and our sins. Compunction is a necessary sorrow, but it is followed by joy and relief because it wins for us one of the greatest blessings: the light of truth and the grace of humility. The tears of the Christian penitent are real tears, but they bring joy.

THOMAS MERTON, *SEASONS OF CELEBRATION*, 115–116

CHOOSING TO LIVE

See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the LORD your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the LORD swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

DEUTERONOMY 30:15–20

PRAYER

My God, you have created me not to die for you but to live for you. You would not wish me blind to my destiny but to accept my life with eyes open to the possibilities of loving you and those intimates with whom I share my life. Open my eyes to my true destiny: to know you through the Son whom you have sent to teach me what I must do to be fully human. I must love you with my whole heart and love my neighbors as I love myself.

LENTEN JOURNAL

What are the illusions in my life that I accept as my reality?





DAY 3

Friday After Ash Wednesday

TRUSTING IN THE LORD'S MERCY

It is necessary that at the beginning of this fast, the Lord should show Himself to us in His mercy. The purpose of Lent is not only expiation, to satisfy the divine justice, but above all a preparation to rejoice in His love. And this preparation consists in receiving the gift of His mercy—a gift which we receive insofar as we open our hearts to it, casting out what cannot remain in the same room with mercy.

Now one of the things we must cast out first of all is fear. Fear narrows the little entrance of our heart. It shrinks up our capacity to love. It freezes up our power to give ourselves. If we were terrified of God as an inexorable judge, we would not confidently await His mercy, or approach Him trustfully in prayer. Our peace and our joy in Lent are a guarantee of grace.

THOMAS MERTON, *SEASONS OF CELEBRATION*, 116–117

FASTING BY BEING MERCIFUL

*Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight,
and to strike with a wicked fist.
Such fasting as you do today
will not make your voice heard on high.
Is such the fast that I choose,
a day to humble oneself?
Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush,
and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?
Will you call this a fast,
a day acceptable to the LORD?

Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?*

ISAIAH 58:4–6

PRAYER

The ears of my heart are opened to hear your commands. Teach me your ways. Teach me to be a disciple of Jesus by becoming a sign of mercy to my neighbors. Help me to accept their weaknesses as I accept my own. Teach me to understand that we are all sinners, groping our way toward you in a desert of forces arranged against us. Let nothing in me separate myself from my neighbors. There is one path toward you, that of mercy, and we must all be united and walk it.

LENTEN JOURNAL

How are fear and mercy factors in my relationship with God?





DAY 4

Saturday After Ash Wednesday

FASTING

Fasting is not merely a natural and ethical discipline for the Christian. It is true that St. Paul evokes the classic comparison of the athlete in training, but the purpose of the Christian fast is not simply to tone up the system, to take off useless fat, and get the body as well as the soul in trim for Easter. The religious meaning of the Lenten fast is deeper than that. Our fasting is to be seen in the context of life and death, and St. Paul made clear that he brought his body into subjection not merely for the good of the soul, but that the whole man might not be “cast away.”... [Fasting] has a part in the work of salvation, and therein the Paschal mystery. The Christian must deny himself, whether by fasting or some other way, in order to make clear his participation in the mystery of our burial with Christ in order to rise with Him to a new life.

THOMAS MERTON, *SEASONS OF CELEBRATION*, 121–122

FASTING FROM MALICIOUS SPEECH

*If you remove the yoke from among you,
the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,
if you offer your food to the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,
then your light shall rise in the darkness,
and your gloom be like the noonday.
The LORD will guide you continually,
and satisfy your needs in parched places,
and make your bones strong;
and you shall be like a watered garden,
like a spring of water,
whose waters never fail.
Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;
you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,
the restorer of streets to live in.*

ISAIAH 58:9B–12

PRAYER

Remove from my heart its malicious tongue that does not speak of peace but only of war and hate. Let me recognize by your grace and teaching the sins of my mouth, the harm I do so casually by my malicious words. Let me fast this Lent from all talk that puts down my neighbor, reviles my perceived enemies, and creates division instead of community. Lord, make my mouth an instrument of your peace.

LENTEN JOURNAL

How can you “fast” from thoughts and speech that harm others, the community, and yourself?





DAY 5

First Sunday in Lent

THE FATHER'S LOVE

The Church's belief in Christ is not a mere static assent to His historical existence, but a dynamic participation in the great cycle of actions that manifest in the world the love of the Father for the ones He has called to union with Himself, in his beloved Son. It is not simply that we are "saved," and that the Father remits the debt contracted by our sins, but that we are loved by the Father, and loved by Him insofar as we believe that He has sent His Son, and has called Him back into heaven after having given all power into His hands.

In the liturgical year, the Church sees and acclaims this action of the Father who so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son for the salvation of men.

THOMAS MERTON, *SEASONS OF CELEBRATION*, 54–55

FASTING IN IMITATION OF CHRIST

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'"

LUKE 4:1-4

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, to be your disciple is to be without an insurance policy. You ask me to abandon a life that lives for bread alone. I sometimes doubt if there is any other. The challenge of your gospel intimidates me. Your courageous defiance of Satan, your fierce integrity, challenge my complacency. You have drawn me into your Lent and are making me afraid. Give me the courage to follow you.

LENTEN JOURNAL

What is "the world" that Jesus asks that you renounce?





DAY 6

Monday of the First Week of Lent

A PENITENT HEART

The Call to “do penance” is based not on the fact that penance will keep us in trim, but on the fact that “the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.” Our penance—*metanoia*—is our response to the proclamation of the Gospel message, the *Kerygma* which announces our salvation if we will hear God and harden not our hearts. The function of penance and self-denial is then contrition, or the “breaking up” of that hardness of heart which prevents us from understanding God’s command to love, and from obeying it effectively.

THOMAS MERTON, *SEASONS OF CELEBRATION*, 130

TURNING TOWARD OUR NEIGHBORS

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’”

MATTHEW 25:31–40

PRAYER

Let me see your face in every face I meet. Let me learn the intimate connection between love of you and compassion for all you have given me to be at one within their struggles and real suffering. Let me damp down my need to take and let my heart fill with the necessity to give, if I am to be your disciple.

LENTEN JOURNAL

What was your last act of “charity”? Why did you do it?





DAY 7

Tuesday of the First Week of Lent

CHRISTIAN SELF-DENIAL

No one can really embrace the Christian asceticism mapped out in the New Testament unless he has some idea of the positive, constructive function of self-denial. The Holy Spirit never asks us to renounce anything without offering us something much higher and much more perfect in return...The function of self-denial is to lead to a positive increase of spiritual energy and life. The Christian dies, not merely in order to die but in order to live. And when he takes up his cross to follow Christ, the Christian realizes, or at least believes, that he is not going to die to anything but death. The Cross is the sign of Christ's victory over death. The Cross is the sign of life. It is the trellis upon which grows the Mystical Vine whose life is infinite joy and whose branches we are. If we want to share the life of that Vine, we must grow on the same trellis and must suffer the same pruning.

THOMAS MERTON, *SEASONS OF CELEBRATION*, 130–131

TURN FROM EVIL AND DO GOOD

*Come, O children, listen to me;
I will teach you the fear of the LORD.
Which of you desires life,
and covets many days to enjoy good?
Keep your tongue from evil,
and your lips from speaking deceit.
Depart from evil, and do good;
seek peace, and pursue it.

The eyes of the LORD are on the righteous,
and his ears are open to their cry.*

PSALM 34:11–15

PRAYER

I turn the tendrils of my heart to you today to embrace the trellis of the Cross. Raise me up toward more light that I might have life. Prune me for more life in you.

LENTEN JOURNAL

In what way could you consider yourself “a vine that God has pruned”?





DAY 8

Wednesday of the First Week of Lent

A BALANCED ASCETICISM

Christian asceticism is remarkable above all for its balance, its sense of proportion. It does not overstress the negative side of the ascetic life, nor does it tend to flatter the ego by diminishing responsibilities or watering down the truth....It warns us that we must make an uncompromising break with the world and all it stands for, but it keeps encouraging us to understand that our existence in “the world” and in time becomes fruitful and meaningful in proportion as we are able to assume spiritual and Christian responsibility for our life, our work, and even for the world we live in. Thus Christian asceticism does not provide a flight from the world, a refuge from stress and the distractions of manifold wickedness. It enables us to enter into the confusion of the world bearing something of the light of Truth in our hearts, and capable of exercising something of the mysterious, transforming power of the Cross, of love and sacrifice.

THOMAS MERTON, *SEASONS OF CELEBRATION*, 131–132

ASCETICISM AS UNCOVERING OUR INNER LIGHT

“No one after lighting a lamp puts it in a cellar, but on the lampstand so that those who enter may see the light. Your eye is the lamp of your body. If your eye is healthy, your whole body is full of light; but if it is not healthy, your body is full of darkness. Therefore consider whether the light in you is not darkness. If then your whole body is full of light, with no part of it in darkness, it will be as full of light as when a lamp gives you light with its rays.”

LUKE 11:33–36

PRAYER

Help me, Lord, to remove the beam in my eye that I might see more clearly the work of your hands in my neighbors' hearts. Dislodge the darkness in my heart and let the light of your presence, always within me, shine forth and bring the portion of your light that I possess to shine with yours for the sake of the world.

LENTEN JOURNAL

In what ways does your life lack “a sense of proportion”?





DAY 9

Thursday of the First Week of Lent

HARVESTING THE WORLD'S GOODS FOR GOD

True sanctity does not consist in trying to live without creatures. It consists in using the goods of life in order to do the will of God. It consists in using God's creation in such a way that everything we touch and see and use and love gives new glory to God. To be a saint means to pass through the world gathering fruits for heaven from every tree and reaping God's glory in every field. The saint is one who is in contact with God in every possible way, in every possible direction. He is united to God by the depths of his own being. He sees and touches God in everything and everyone around him. Everywhere he goes, the world rings and resounds (though silently) with the deep harmonies of God's glory.

THOMAS MERTON, *SEASONS OF CELEBRATION*, 137

SEEK GOOD AND YOU SHALL FIND IT

“Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!”

MATTHEW 7:7–11

PRAYER

If I go to the sea, you are there. If I go to the forests, you are there. If I enter the city, you are there in everyone and everything I see. Open my eyes to your goodness that is everywhere around me. Give me a heart that delights in your infinite creativity.

LENTEN JOURNAL

How has God been good to you?



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