

A Lenten Examination of Conscience

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Teacher/Facilitator Preparation

The Season of Lent invites the baptized and those preparing for baptism to live more deeply our baptismal promises. For some people, Lent has only a penitential self-focus. Yet, the Second Vatican Council reminded us that the focus of Lent is twofold: penitential and baptismal.

How can this season in the Church's annual paschal cycle help us to live out our baptism more deeply? How, for example, can we be more attentive to our relationships – with God, with our families and communities, with our world, with creation? How can we be especially attentive to becoming more and more Christians who are committed to the establishment of right relationships, that is, to justice?

Invite your students/group participants to pause in this season and look outward – towards their relationships and their work in building up just relationships in every aspect of their lives.

The Church's prayer can help us in our reflection. In the following reflection (which begins on the following page) I have incorporated questions that are offered in the Examination of Conscience which is included as an appendix to the Rite of Penance. The Examination may be used for the sacramental rite of penance (communal and individual) and for penitential prayer services. Please note that I have included here only a few sets of the questions that are part of the Examination of Conscience. The entire Examination may be found in *The Rites*, volume I (Liturgical Press).

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Donald is a 50-year-old Catholic who works as a foreman for a construction company. He has never been one to concern himself too much with others – other than his own family and a few golfing buddies. Donald tends to complain about the appeals that come in the mail from various charitable organizations and grows weary of the media’s coverage of humanitarian crises around the world. “I’ve worked hard for what I have and have been able to give my family,” he says. “Everyone else can do the same. Their problems are not mine. Besides,” he adds, “what can I possibly do to help people in places like Pakistan or the Sudan or Haiti?”

Lent for Donald is predictable (which he likes; no surprises, please) in the sense that every year he follows the same regiment: He empties all the candy jars in the house (much to the dismay of his wife and children). He eats only seafood on Fridays (no meat). He limits alcohol consumption to one beer on Sundays (since Sundays are not technically counted as days of Lent). He goes either to morning Mass or Stations of the Cross every Friday during the season, and he doesn’t miss Mass on any of the Sundays. He also goes to confession sometime before Easter. If he is able to “achieve” these disciplines, Donald feels he has “successfully kept Lent.” Yet, nothing ever really changed for Donald – nothing about his attitudes, nothing about his willingness to be of service to others, nothing about his take on the world’s needs.

This year, Donald’s daughter, Leigh, a college junior, asks him to go with her to a Lenten prayer service at the university parish. Donald hesitated but then thought, “My daughter is actually going to church. I want to support that, so I’ll go.”

On the way to the university chapel, Leigh told Donald that she has decided to help support a woman in Rwanda with a monthly contribution to Women for Women International. Donald’s first question was, “Why are you spending your money in that way? You work hard. I work hard. All to get you through college and give you things that you need and want.” Leigh explained that because she feels so strongly about wanting to help women who live in poverty, she will use the money she saves from not treating herself to a latte every day at the campus coffee bar. “I don’t

need lattes, Dad. My new friend in Rwanda needs food and help with an education. That is far more important than satisfying my taste for coffee drinks.”

Although he felt a little annoyed, Donald said no more, especially since they had arrived at the chapel for the prayer service. During the service, people were invited to spend nearly 30 minutes in silence with an examination of conscience. The examination was different than any Donald had ever used. He only ever turned to the pages in his father’s old prayerbook in preparation to go to confession. None of the prayerbook questions prompted Donald to think about others, especially those in need, those who are mistreated, those who live with violence, and so on, in the way that these questions did:

“Do I share my possessions with the less fortunate? Do I do my best to help the victims of oppression, misfortune, and poverty? Or do I look down on my neighbor, especially the poor, the sick, the elderly, strangers, and people of other races?”

“Does my life reflect the mission I received in confirmation? Do I share in the apostolic and charitable works of the Church and in the life of my parish? Have I helped to meet the needs of the Church and of the world and prayed for them: for unity in the Church, for the spread of the Gospel among the nations, for peace and justice, etc.?”

“Am I concerned for the good and prosperity of the human community in which I live, or do I spend my life caring only for myself? Do I share to the best of my ability in the work of promoting justice, morality, harmony, and love in human relations? Have I done my duty as a citizen?”
(From the appendix to the Rite of Penance, *The Rites*, vol. 1.)

The questions gave Donald much to ponder, and in fact, he really didn’t know how to respond – at least not that evening at the university parish’s prayer service.

During the Easter Season, after Donald had once again “succeeded” in his usual Lenten disciplines, he received a mailing from Catholic Relief Services, asking for support of one of its programs designed to educate people in a



trade that will lead to them to a job and a means of support for themselves and their families. As Donald was about to follow his normal course of action with such mailings – that is, a toss into the wastebasket – he paused.

He stared at the literature in his hand and suddenly thought about Leigh. He recalled Leigh's willingness to let go of something she enjoyed but which was hardly a necessity, in order to support the woman in Rwanda. Donald remembered their time together at the Lenten prayer service. Some of the questions from the Examination of Conscience used that evening flooded his mind. It was a moment of conversion for Donald – a turning point. He sat down and wrote a check to CRS. He then remembered seeing an announcement in his parish bulletin that a group of parishioners were going to join up with Habitat for Humanity to build homes for people in Bay St. Louis, MS who lost their dwellings to hurricane Katrina. Donald called the parish contact for the project and offered his construction skills and expertise.

Donald's story of conversion invites us this Lenten season to attend to areas in our lives which need to be transformed. What can we learn about ourselves from the questions Donald was invited to wrestle with the night he went to the prayer service with his daughter? And in light of these questions and our reflections, what do we need to do – not just for the 40 days of Lent but every day?

