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Lenten Transformation by Kerry Patrick San Chirico

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The title *Lenten Transformation* is rather broad. Perhaps when you read it, you naturally thought of a transformation within the person who maintains the disciplines of the season, those being prayer, almsgiving and fasting. Well, you are partially right. A couple weeks ago, in preparation for the Lenten Spring, we read the story of the Prodigal Son. Thinking about this parable, it dawned on me that our activities in Lent can be likened to the Prodigal's journey *back* to the father. We take stock of who we are, we prepare in anticipation for the eventual encounter, we rehearse our words, we are filled with anxiety about how we will be received. Struggling along that path, we might wonder how we ever got into this mess. We experience moments of rebellion, then humility, then supplication, boredom, expectant joy, then trepidation. Lent, as we often hear, is our journey home. In this way, Great Lent is a condensed lifetime, and we may find ourselves facing in microcosm, what we face not only throughout the year, but throughout our lives. Moreover, because the time is so condensed, both our victories and even more our weaknesses are seen in striking relief. Our *shadows* become stark, dense, taking on lives of their own. This is interesting, because in nature, shadows are the darkest when the light is the closest. So in those dark times, as counter-intuitive as it may seem, the Son is actually the nearest. As we were reminded last week, there is no place where God is not. "For I am convinced," St Paul confesses, "that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38-39). And we read from the Psalter, "Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast. If I say, 'Surely the darkness will hide me, and the light become night around me,' even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you" (Psalm 139).

Now there is one significant difference between us and the Prodigal Son, of course. We know the father's response to him when he arrived in those rags. Before the Prodigal even got those well-rehearsed words out of his mouth, the elder father was running out to greet him. And this is God's fundamental disposition towards us, His children. Unlike the Prodigal, we can be assured of the Father's embrace. We know that God hears the prayers of us sinners, that, as Fr. Antony reminds us over and over again, the love of God for us is as inexhaustible as God is Himself. This is good news.

The Lenten transformation is thus a coming to our senses, the realization of who we are in the Father. It is brought about by comparing our identity in Christ with the identity we consciously and subconsciously fashion out of the rags and refuse of the world. Of course, this is the meaning of that clichéd word spirituality. If you want a definition of it, consider this one: *spirituality, in the Christian sense, is the process of growing into things as they are.* It is the stripping away of all the illusions we attach to ourselves both inadvertently and willingly. This stripping away takes place by God's grace through faith and by our participation in that grace.

Well these are the basics of Lent. If we could get a handle on these realities, to really internalize them, we would do more than move mountains. But tonight, I want to take this theme of Lenten transformation one step further. It's a step we often fail to make. Because if Lent is about transformation, it is not merely about *individual* transformation. During the next few minutes, I'd like us to think about the *social*

implications of prayer, worship, almsgiving, fasting, repentance, honesty about who we are, reconciliation with God and with neighbor. Because, after all, none of these actions take place in a vacuum. We are inherently social beings. The story of Robinson Crusoe—the story of one man marooned on an island, who can do everything himself and needs no one—is a bourgeois myth of the nineteenth century, reflecting the aspirations of Western Europeans of the age. That reality has never existed and will never exist—thank God. And John Wayne—the actor who went it alone, who never showed emotions—well, that was just bad acting.

Of course, if you think about our Orthodox faith, we know this to be true. Every sacrament is social. We began this Lenten journey with Forgiveness Vespers. Let's note the obvious: we did it together. We asked one another for forgiveness. Our failings and our triumphs are experienced in community, within relationships. We did not prostrate ourselves in front of our bedroom mirror. Salvation, like life, is a corporate affair. We read in Ephesians 4:28 "For we are members of one another." Perhaps the only thing we truly do alone is go to hell. How unnatural, then, how unlike God's intention, is that place.

We are social beings. And if this is the case, then all that fasting, praying, almsgiving, reconciliation, soul-searching, should have effects on society. I want us to think about the radical transformation of society that *could* take place, if we took these Lenten characteristics out of the forty days and applied them to the other 325. But just before I do that, I want to talk about our relationship as Christians to the world around us.

You know, perhaps one of the biggest issues to face Christianity over the last two millennia is Christ's relationship with culture. Do we reject it, forming isolated communities attempting to be sealed off from the world? Do we say Christ and culture are basically the same—the problem when nationalism and religion get mixed up? Do we say that the calling of God and that of the world forever will make conflicting yet legitimate claims on us, forever placing us in a paradoxical relationship to both God and society? Or do we see Christ as the *transformer* of culture?¹ There's that word again, "transformation." "Christ the Transformer" of culture. I want to argue that when the Orthodox faith particularly and Christianity generally has been true to itself, it has had the effect of transforming the environment in which it finds itself. Whether we speak of the transformation that took place as Christianity encountered Hellenism, thus changing Hellenism from the inside out, or whether we speak of Christianity's civilizing influence over the tribes of Northwestern Europe up through the Middle Ages, or the process that took place between the Russian missionaries and the native Aleuts of Alaska in the 19th century, we can see a pattern wherein Christianity affirms that which God has given a culture, affirms it as good, while rejecting those elements of culture believed to be contrary to the Gospel.

Let me give you an example from the fourth century, with St. Basil the Great and a letter he wrote to some youths preparing to begin studies in Athens,² something that he had himself done a couple generations earlier. Now Basil knew that his young charges would be encountering pagan thought, literature, poetry, science, for it was this education that formed the typical Roman citizen. But Basil knew there were pitfalls, he knew there were aspects of this culture that were deeply antithetical to the Christian faith. He writes to them, "At the very outset, therefore, we should examine each of the branches of knowledge and adapt it to our end, according to the Doric proverb, 'bringing the stone to the line.'" That is, all learning is to be tested to see if it measures up to the Christian standard. Not just in learning, but seemingly in all aspects of life and with all forms of knowledge, the students are commended to seek that which leads to eternity. And they are to discern the possible eternal nature of all of this by placing it up against the Christian standard, exemplified by Christ's teaching to love God and neighbor.

Now I hear you asking, What about ascetics, the monks? Weren't they trying to get away from society? Well, yes, but remember, the good ones were there praying for the people back in those cities. And there is

¹ These basic positions towards culture are examined in H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 2001).

² Saint Basil, "To the Young Men, On How They Might Profit from Pagan Literature." *Saint Basil, The Letters*. RJ Deferrari and MRP McGuire, trans. London/Cambridge: W. Heinemann/Harvard University Press, 1961-72, 378-435.

a long ascetical tradition of withdrawal that ends in service. This was the case for St. Antony, St. Basil, St. Benedict, St. Gregory Palamas, and for St. Seraphim of Sarov, among others. These two aspects of withdrawal and leadership in service are connected, because without first undergoing ascetical preparation, often for decades, they would not have had the spiritual resources to be spiritual and ecclesial guides and masters. Moreover, as we often read about the in the writings of the Desert Fathers, the great ascetics would soon be discovered and sought out, with monasteries forming soon thereafter—and we see the birth of coenobitic or communal monasticism. So even there in the desert, society cannot be avoided. There is no escaping the social.

Yet how do we tie Lent into social transformation? Fasting, praying, almsgiving. How can these activities affect society? Let's look at each one of these in turn. First, fasting. You know, Sheri and I spend a lot less on food during Lent. A diet without meat and dairy can be healthier, but it definitely should be cheaper. We hear a lot in our country about the need to grow the economy; we're told to spend—even though most of us are just putting it on a credit card. I guess the assumption is that we can eventually pay off that visa bill. But by changing our diet, we are actually being quite counter-cultural. You see, we're not just accepting the society's "*Eat more, Buy more, Be more*" mentality. And this is hard. There used to be a time in America when because of the Catholic population, there were always fish dishes on menus. Well, now that Catholics are not stressing fasting from meat on Fridays, that has been largely lost. And so, it seems that there are even fewer voices saying, "No, man does not live by bread alone, but by every word which comes from the mouth of God." We need these reminders. And so does our society, desperately. Our society, and we are part of it, have become satiated.

A Lenten attitude brings us back to things as they are. And what is that in this case? That, in fact, in two-thirds of the world, it is the norm to *not* eat meat—not for religious reasons but because meat is so expensive. Seeing things as they are means realizing that resources are limited, and should thus be well-used. Did you know that in this country one in ten households experience hunger or the risk of hunger, or that 840 million people in the world are malnourished? One hundred fifty three million of these people are under the age of five. Churches have been very active in trying to alleviate hunger. It's been churches running the soup kitchens reporting an increase in the number of people in their programs, increases that churches can't match. The US Conference of Mayors reported that last year requests for emergency food assistance increased an average of 19%. Also, 48% of those requesting this aid were members of families, and 38% of the adults requesting help were employed, they had jobs. Some of the reasons given for this include high housing costs, low-paying jobs, unemployment, and the economic downturn.

So by looking at fasting and our relationship to food, we may get a sense of what it is like for most of the world's population; it also moves us towards doing some things about hunger. Seeing things as they are includes coming to terms with the suffering of our neighbors. Because if we spend less on our stomachs, if we slow down our lifestyles to support a lighter diet, then we have more time to spend on helping our neighbor, both with our time and with our financial resources. I want to stress that the best way to give is to give of ourselves. As Orthodox we believe in the inherent value of persons. I liked what Father said a couple weeks ago about saying hello to a person on the streets. So often we avert our eyes, we get scared. After all, "He might push me beyond my comfort zone." "He may ask me for something." "She may want something I don't want to give." "What if I get embarrassed?" "Is that person really poor?" "What if he hurts me?" Seeing the face of Christ in the poor takes time; it's a gift—but it's also a muscle that develops through the ins and outs of service.

In 1993 I visited Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity for the first time in Calcutta. On the third day, a few of us were asked to work at a place called Prem Dan. Among other things, it serves as a shelter for the aged, retarded and disabled. We donned our aprons and went to work. But then I saw what we had to do: I looked out and saw scores of elderly and sick men who needed to be bathed by hand. I thought to myself, "Dear God, this is too much for me." All around were men who looked like concentration camp survivors. Most were so thin and frail that we had to carry them to the large outdoor baths to be washed. I remember one man. He was nineteen years old, dying of tuberculosis. He was my height, but maybe 60 pounds. I remember washing him—every part of him—awkwardly, praying for strength. He looked up at

me with these eyes full of life and understanding at the awkwardness of the moment, and a certain amount of quiet resignation. How beyond my comfort zone was this experience, yet how utterly ridiculous are comfort zones in such situations. There were few times in my life when I felt like I was doing the right thing, but at this moment, everything made sense. There was no room for rationalizations, for hiding, for the totalitarianism of the ego. This was one of the most real experiences I had ever had. The point of the story is that I couldn't think my way into this understanding; I had to live it, I had to *do* it. And isn't that the way of the Lenten disciplines? We have to do them. You see, most often, we don't think our way into a new way of acting, we act our way into a new way of thinking. And when we're giving alms, we are not only changing our world, we are changing ourselves one action at a time.

Now the word almsgiving in Greek is "*eliomousyne*." It literally means "doing acts of mercy." So we should not think of this discipline as even being primarily financial. It is to imitate the merciful God, by which we mean the God who shows steadfast love. By imitating God's steadfast love, we become like God. Nevertheless, doing acts of mercy will probably include the financial element. As we begin to see Christ in one of the least of these, it is also important to put our resources where our mouths are. You want to see what people really believe in? Take a look at how they spend their money. Through my work with non-profits, I've learned that you should be able to figure out the mission and values of the agency by looking at its budget. If someone were to look at your spending, would there be enough evidence to indict you as a one who cares for the poor?

Now giving alms in this day and age actually takes careful discernment. In this country we don't often see beggars sitting at the church doorstep. Again, this is the reality in many parts of the world, and it certainly was true in the patristic period. This means that we have a tougher job. We have to discern the best ways to spend our money and time, the best agencies to work with, the best politicians to elect who believe in helping the poor in the best ways possible. Now if we're just rushing from one activity to the next, not thinking about God and neighbor, then it will be nearly impossible to find time. But if we are dedicated to taking the Lenten lifestyle into the rest of the year, slowing down, taking stock, prioritizing our activities based on our values, then we will find more time.

Hopefully, you see that when I speak about almsgiving I'm not talking about writing a check. ELIOMOUSYNE. I'm talking about personal engagement, which might include writing a check. A lot of us don't have much money. But we can give some time, we can give of ourselves, our most valuable commodity.

Which leads us finally to prayer. We know that without prayer, our ascetical efforts will be short-lived. Prayer under-girds Lent from beginning to end. We know this--that's why there are so many services. They provide us with the strength to make it through the Lenten journey, just as it's prayer that will get us through life. It is prayer that places all things before God, and prayer that transforms us and our world. Looking at what we've discussed so far, it's prayer that helps sustain and give reason to our fasting. Also, if we are going to discern how to give alms properly, we *need* to pray. Too often Christian agencies seeking to serve the poor lose any power they once had because they foolishly allowed prayer to become *an* accessory, rather than *the* foundation. When that happens, burnout is not far behind, along with ineffectiveness, and loss of Christian witness. CS Lewis once said that the Christians who did the most for this world were those who never lost sight of the next. When Christians lose sight of the Kingdom their irrelevance is almost guaranteed.

Fasting, prayer, almsgiving. These three things have the power, not only to transform us, but to change the society we live in. Hopefully, I've given us a glimpse of how that can happen. I learned a lot in India—and a lot on the back of a scooter, listening to my co-worker, an Indian pastor named Robin, speak about Christian witness in India. He said, "Brother, as Christians, we have two eyes looking out at the world, but we have millions of eyes looking back at us." The world sees what Christians are doing. And what is it that they see? Will they see us loving the world unto *transformation*, or will they see us as no different at all from everyone else? Self-centered, self-absorbed, scurrying from one activity to the next while failing to do the one thing needful. Will they hear us hiding behind high falutin' platitudes about loving the poor or will they *see us* actually *servicing* the poor and looking for long-term solutions to limit poverty as it now

exists? These are serious times, and these are the hard questions we must face. But the only thing that really proves the Christian faith, proves that “Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death and upon those the tombs bestowing life,” are churches that actually practice what they preach. Thank God we have a place like this where we *can* work to demonstrate the reality of Christ’s Resurrection and His on-going Resurrection in our own lives.

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