

Monday

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*

Scripture

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.”
(Matt 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.

Tuesday

Christian self-denial

No one can really embrace the Christian asceticism mapped out in the New Testament unless [they have] 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 [they take] up [their] cross to follow Christ, the Christian realizes, or at least believes, that [they are] 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*

Scripture

*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. (Psalm 34.11-14)*

Prayer

I turn the branches 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.

Wednesday

Balanced self-denial

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*

Scripture

'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.

Thursday

Harvesting for God

True sanctity...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. [They are united to God by the depths of their own being. They see and touch God in everything and everyone around them. Everywhere they go, the world rings and resounds (though silently) with the deep harmonies of God's glory.]

—Thomas Merton, *Seasons of Celebration*

Scripture

'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.'
(Matt 7.7-8)

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.

Friday

The goal is liberation

We cannot use created things for the glory of God unless we are in control of ourselves. We cannot be in control of ourselves if we are under the power of the desires and appetites and passions of the flesh. We cannot give ourselves to God if we do not belong to ourselves. And we do not belong to ourselves if we belong to our own ego. The real purpose of Christian asceticism is then not to liberate the soul from the desires and needs of the body, but to bring the whole person into complete submission to God's will as expressed in the concrete demands of life in all its existential reality.

—Thomas Merton, *Seasons of Celebration*

Scripture

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect. (Romans 12.2)

Prayer

Help me understand your work in me. You have come to liberate me just as I am. You love me just as I am. You will heal me just as I am. Today I know my resistance to your love and renounce it. I affirm my will to follow your way and be more truly your disciple.

Saturday

Ordered discipline

God asks us to give Him everything. But we have already said what that means: using all creatures for God alone. Consequently, our [discipline] must always be balanced. The true ascetic is not one who never relaxes, but one who relaxes at the right time and in the right measure, who orders [their] whole life, under the direct guidance of the Holy Spirit, so that [they work] when God wants [them] to work, rests when God wants [them] to rest and prays constantly through it all by a simple and loving gaze that keeps [their] heart and mind united with the indwelling Spirit.

—Thomas Merton, *Seasons of Celebration*

Scripture

‘You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax-collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Matt 5.43-48)

Prayer

Order my disordered heart. Let me see in whoever is enemy and stranger to me the other half of myself that I refuse to embrace. Loving Spirit, perfect the image of your love in me every day. Create an inclusive heart within me. Let my heart become peaceful. May I bring peace wherever I go and to whomever I encounter.