

Editor's Note: CFN will be offering periodic meditations during the Lenten season from *Divine Intimacy*, a classic volume by a Carmelite priest and master of the interior life, Fr. Gabriel of St. Mary Magdalen (1893-1953). Each meditation is numbered as it appears in the book, according to its place in the liturgical year.

We sincerely hope that these Lenten meditations will help readers enter deeply into Our Lord's saving Passion and death through mental prayer, and likewise prepare us all to celebrate His triumphant Resurrection at Easter.

94. Ash Wednesday

By Fr. Gabriel of St. Mary Magdalen, O.C.D.

1. "Dust thou art, and into dust thou shalt return" (Gen. 3:19). These words, spoken for the first time by God to Adam after he had committed sin, are repeated today by the Church to every Christian, in order to remind him of two fundamental truths—his nothingness and the reality of death.

Dust, the ashes which the priest puts on our foreheads today, has no substance; the lightest breath will disperse it. It is a good representation of man's nothingness: "O Lord, my substance is as nothing before Thee" (Ps. 38:6), exclaims the Psalmist. Our pride, our arrogance, needs to grasp this truth, to realize that everything in us is nothing. Drawn from nothing by the creative power of God, by His infinite love which willed to communicate His being and His life to us, we cannot—because of sin—be reunited with Him for eternity without passing through the dark reality of death. The consequence and punishment of sin, death is, in itself, bitter and painful; but Jesus, Who wanted to be like us in all things, in submitting to death has given Christians the strength to accept it out of love. Nevertheless, death exists, and we should reflect on it, not in order to distress ourselves, but to arouse ourselves to do good. "In all thy works, remember thy last end, and thou shalt never sin" (Sir. [Ecclus.] 7:40). The thought of death places before our eyes the vanity of earthly things, the brevity of life—"All things are passing; God alone remains"—and therefore it urges us to detach ourselves from everything, to scorn every earthly satisfaction, and to seek God alone. The thought of death makes us understand that "all is vanity, except to love God and serve Him alone" (*Imitation of Christ* I, 1, 4).

"Remember that you have only one soul; that you have only one death to die ... then there will be many things about which you care nothing" (St. Teresa of Jesus, *Maxims* 68), that is, you will give up everything that has no eternal value. Only love and fidelity to God are of

value for eternity. “In the evening of life, you will be judged on love” (St. John of the Cross, *Spiritual Maxims* I, 57).

2. Today’s liturgy is an invitation to penance. During the imposition of the ashes we chant: “Let us change our garments, and cover ourselves with sackcloth and ashes; let us fast and weep before the Lord.” It is an invitation to the corporal penance which is especially prescribed for this season; but it is immediately followed by the invitation to be converted: “Let us atone for the sins we have committed.” The end of physical mortification is spiritual penance—humility, recognition of our faults, compunction of heart, and the reform of our lives.

This is the predominant thought of the day. We read in the Epistle (Joel 2:12-19), “Thus saith the Lord: be converted to Me with all your heart, in fasting and in weeping and in mourning. And rend your hearts, and not your garments.” Compunction and conversion of heart hold the first place, because the corporal penance that does not proceed from a contrite heart has no value. On the other hand, corporal penance prepares the soul for conversion, insofar as it is the means of reaching it. We read in the Preface, “O God, by fasting You repress sin, elevate the soul, and give it strength and recompense.” One who wishes to reach the goal, which is the renewing of the spirit, must embrace willingly the means which leads to it, namely, corporal penance. At the same time, he must remember that compunction of heart gives value to corporal penance, which in its turn engenders and gives expression to compunction of heart. These two elements are never separated.

The Gospel (Matt. 6:16-21) says further that all penance must be accomplished sincerely and joyfully, without vain ostentation: “When you fast, be not as the hypocrites, sad. For they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast.” Vanity and pride make even the most austere penitential practices useless and sometimes even sinful; they destroy their substance and value, and reduce them to mere externals, empty of all content. Hence, when you mortify your body, take care to mortify your self-love still more.

Text taken from [Divine Intimacy](#) (Baronius Press, 2015), pp. 267-268.