



# Father Fred's Forty Little Sins as confessed to Mother Agnes

## Daily Meditations for Lent

### (ii) Second Week of Lent

By Reverend Christopher Harrison

[www.nottinghamchurches.org](http://www.nottinghamchurches.org)

#### Monday after first Sunday of Lent

Mother Agnes:

Have you managed to find those five minutes a day for listening to God, Father, which we talked about last time you came to see me?

Father Fred.

Yes - or at least I think so. I've given God the amount of time you suggested, although I'm not sure that it's always quality time.

A: What do you mean?

F: I mean that even if I sit or kneel in prayer for five minutes, my mind soon starts to wander. I can occupy it with spoken prayers, but if I try to empty it of thoughts, so that I can listen to God, all kinds of distractions occur. My mind immediately moves to my next visit, the sermon theme for next Sunday, and all the various tasks of the day.

A: Don't let these discourage you - people far holier than you have had the same problem. The first stage of the battle is to realise that these distractions are happening, and gently to come back to the focus of your prayer - the stillness of heart and mind which you are seeking.

F: I really am not very good at this - it's far easier just to say prayers to God and ask Him for various things. And surely we should be praying for others rather than just being still.

A: If you can cultivate this stillness of mind, then your other prayers will be more focussed. You will be less likely to be thrown off course in your daily life.

Today's task - not quite a penance, I suppose - is to practise the art of perseverance in prayer. Don't give up when it becomes difficult, but remember that prayer is far more than just enjoying the presence of God, but also involves determination and even, sometimes, hard work.

## Tuesday after first Sunday of Lent

Mother Agnes:

Good morning, Father. How is your day going?

Father Fred:

Well, thank you. The sun is shining, spring isn't far off now, and all seems well with the world - at least in this corner of the country.

A: I'm glad to hear it. Positive thinking is always helpful, even it isn't particularly scriptural. Still, such an attitude might lead some people to a greater trust in God.

F: Yes. But I should have mentioned something that happened to me on the way here. There was a young man standing by the bus shelter asking people for money.

A: What did you do?

F: I talked to him for a while, but soon realised that he wasn't genuine. When I offered to buy him a sandwich he said it was OK, he wasn't hungry. He's probably on drugs, I'd have thought.

A: Do you often give people money if they ask you for it?

F: Not usually. It doesn't tend to solve the real problem, whatever that may be. It's better to give to charities that help the poor.

A: When you met the young man this morning, you were generous with your time and offer of help.

I agree that money doesn't always solve the problems of people like these. However, each time God sends someone in our path asking for money, it should remind us to question how generous we really are with our money and our time - even if we do not give to that particular person. As you go home, ask yourself whether you could have done more for that person, even if it would have involved being late for me. And how exactly do you imagine him - just as a drug addict, or as an individual created by God and loved by Him?

## Wednesday after first Sunday of Lent

Mother Agnes:

Tell me what you like most about your work, Father.

Father Fred:

I feel very privileged to do what I do and be paid for it. I meet all kinds of people, my position is secure, I have a lot of freedom to organise my day as I would like - and perhaps above all, there is always the knowledge that I am serving God.

A: You are very fortunate. Most people don't have such satisfying work. I can't see why more people don't try to become vicars.

F: I agree. Moreover, it's not often that people criticise you. When things aren't going well in your church, people tend to blame the parishioners for not attending. Unless, of course, you make some serious and public mistake.

A: You seem very confident in what you do.

F: I suppose I am, really, although I don't tend to think of it in those terms. I just enjoy being needed by people and being at the front of the church leading the services. And my flock are always so nice to me.

A: Have you ever wondered whether that's healthy? Shouldn't you sometimes be more critical of yourself? Basking too often in the comfort of other people's appreciation can be addictive.

Today's task for you is to spend some time imagining that nobody sees the things you do for God. Nobody praises you, nobody thanks you. Would you still do your work as conscientiously as you do now?

## Thursday after first Sunday of Lent

Mother Agnes:

Father, do you think worrying is a sin?

Father Fred:

That's a difficult one. Most people you see worrying would probably say that they can't help it. You surely can't call something sinful if it's part of someone's temperament.

A: So is anger a sin? Some people seem to be more prone to anger than others - I assume that this isn't anything to do with sin either?

F: It depends on whether the anger leads to words or actions which hurt other people, I'd have thought.

A: If you control your anger, therefore, it's less likely to lead you into sin than if you don't - that must be obvious. Isn't the same true of worrying, or anxiety?

F: I don't think that anxiety is something you can control in the same way as anger. When you have problems, they eat away at you and the anxiety will remain as long as the problems are still there.

A: Why, then, did our Lord tell us not to worry? Why did he say that you can't add a single hour to your life by worrying?

F: I must say I've always found this very difficult.

A: You know, I'm sure, that controlling anger is something we all need to practise. To most people, it doesn't come naturally.

Your task for today is to try to understand that it isn't impossible to control your anxiety either. You don't have to be a slave to worry. I know that this sounds difficult, but sometimes God is trying to tell us something when we worry. We need to find out what that is - and to act upon it. To take charge - not to be passive in the grip of anxiety.

But sometimes, of course, all we can do is trust, pray and remember that it isn't the worrying that will change things, but what we do about its causes.

## Friday after first Sunday of Lent

Mother Agnes:

You don't seem your normal calm self this morning, Father.

Father Fred:

No - I do feel rather shaken. On my way here I stumbled on a paving stone which was protruding, and fell onto a baby buggy. The little toddler wasn't strapped in, and he fell out and hit his head on the ground.

A: Was he badly hurt?

F: No, but he wasn't very happy, and nor was his mother. The Council really should look after its pavements better - and of course the mother should have kept the boy's harness on.

A: So you're saying that it wasn't really your fault, then?

F: No, I don't think it was entirely my fault - in fact it wasn't my fault at all.

A: But isn't any event, if you examine it closely, the result of a combination of factors? On your argument, you could say that you were never really responsible for anything. If, for example, you lashed out and hit someone deliberately, you could always find some way of justifying yourself - such as pressure of work, or frustration.

F: But this is different. The injury could easily have been avoided if the Council and the mother had both acted responsibly.

A: I don't think it is entirely different. Every situation in which we find ourselves is to some extent ambiguous as to where responsibility lies. This ambiguity - bolstered, for some Christians, by their confidence in God's forgiveness of their sins - can lead us to excuse ourselves far too readily for mistakes we make or sins we commit.

Some people, I know, always assume that when something goes wrong it's their fault. They need to realise that they aren't usually as guilty as they think. But this isn't your problem, Father. Your task for today is to look closely at situations in which things go wrong, where you are involved, and ask yourself whether you are taking enough responsibility for this.

Jesus took the blame for the sins of the whole world, even though he himself was without sin. Shouldn't we be more ready, then, to take the blame even when we don't think it's our fault?

### **Saturday after first Sunday of Lent**

Mother Agnes:

How do you think your daily Lenten meetings with me are going, Father? Are they making a difference to your inner life?

Father Fred:

I think so - you've given me a lot to ponder upon. But one thing in particular bothers me. All this "inner life" stuff can make one very introspective. The emphasis on personal sin, moreover, can make one forget that sin is corporate.

A: What do you mean by that?

F: I am referring to the sins of society as distinct from the sins of the individual. For centuries the Church was very successful in making people feel sinful and guilty, and it maintained its power over them by being the only way in which they could feel forgiven. Yet all the while oppression and injustice were rampant - society as a whole was arguably more in need of redemption than the individual.

A: Is that really still the case today? In recent years the Church has arguably focussed so much on political and social issues that it has neglected to help people find personal salvation.

F: Maybe, but there are also plenty of churches where the message of Jesus as a personal Saviour seems to be all that matters. As long as your own sins are forgiven, what is happening in society at large seems to be almost irrelevant.

A: I think that the fashion for focussing on corporate sin can be a convenient excuse for avoiding a confrontation with one's personal spiritual inadequacies. Of course we mustn't let these dominate our lives, but nor must we neglect them.

Your task for today - and for tomorrow, Sunday, when we don't meet - is to look rigorously for areas in your life where you are avoiding facing up to sin. You may prefer to keep some or all of these between you and God. But be prepared to tell me about at least one of them on Monday.