



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

Daily Meditations for Lent

(iii) Third Week of Lent

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Monday after Second Sunday of Lent

Mother Agnes:

How did you get on with the task I set you on Saturday, Father - to look carefully at those areas in your life where you are avoiding facing up to sin?

Father Fred.

It wasn't easy at all. In fact I'm very good at avoidance. There always seems to be something else which needs to be done. I'm so easily distracted.

A: Sometimes you need to be very firm in your resolve to do what you know needs to be done. It's the old familiar problem of being determined enough.

F: I know - it's always tempting to be sidetracked into doing things that are more immediately rewarding. And then you justify it by saying to yourself that this is what God wanted you to do. Whereas of course you are deceiving yourself if you say that just because something feels right, this is always what God wants.

A: So how strong is your determination to decide what needs to be done and then to do it?

F: Not always as strong as it might be. I think it must be far easier to get things done if you are working as part of a team than if, like me, you tend to work on your own.

A: I agree, motivating oneself is more difficult than if someone else is motivating you. But it does bring spiritual advantages. You have to face up to all those inner impulses that so readily sabotage what you need to do.

The ancients talked of the sin of sloth - which is to do with avoiding doing the things we should be doing, and avoiding changing those aspects of our behaviour which need attention. We can make sloth look acceptable by calling it serenity or calm. Today, Father, have another look at your life in this light.

Tuesday after Second Sunday of Lent

Mother Agnes:

What have you got to tell me about this morning, Father Fred? What's been happening in your inner life?

Father Fred:

Well, I've been thinking quite hard about what you said on Saturday. We all have areas of our life which are less than satisfactory, which we'd rather not face up to.

A: That's a typical sentence from a sermon. What about you yourself?

F: If I'm honest with myself, there's probably quite a lot I could say. The problem is that one becomes so used to affirming others, and not being judgemental towards them, that one becomes very charitable indeed towards one's own shortcomings. Being confident of God's forgiveness is a great way of achieving peace of mind, but I can see that it doesn't always help one to become rigorous with oneself spiritually.

A: Where would you start, then?

F: I suppose I really should try harder to listen carefully to what other people say. I mean - in everyday matters, at work, at home - not finishing their sentences for them, not assuming that you know what they're going to say before they've finished talking.

A: You've highlighted something that is far more important than people often realise. The way we listen to people - or don't listen, as the case may be - can be very revealing. We can so easily forget to put our own concerns to one side, which we usually need to do in order to give other people the full measure of our time and concentration.

Today, Father, make a new effort to listen fully to those around you. Not just when you want to do so, but when they want you to hear them. For if you aren't very good at listening to the words other people say, how can you have any chance of discerning the hidden messages which they may contain? It's called attentiveness, as I'm sure you know.

Wednesday after Second Sunday of Lent

Mother Agnes:

You look very tired this morning, Father.

Father Fred:

Yes, I didn't stop working until late yesterday evening. So much to do - all the paperwork, then preparing the weekend's services...and how do I ever find time to pray, I wonder?

A: We talked about that a few days ago. I'm more worried about your physical health at the moment. How fit do you think you are?

F: Not very, I confess. I suppose that unlike many people, I don't have to walk to catch the train to work, and I've never been a very sporty person. I've always preferred - how shall we call them - the more cultural pastimes.

A: Sitting in an armchair listening to Verdi may feel therapeutic, Father, but it doesn't do much for your physical condition. Doesn't the garden need some attention at this time of year?

F: Yes, I suppose, but the weather has been so bad, and I like to allow a certain anarchy to feature in the garden - good for the wildlife, you know.

A: I suppose God created the weeds as well as the other plants. What right do we have to decide which is which, after all?

You do seem to be very adept at avoiding things that keep you fit, though. Try to walk for at least half an hour every day. You can pray while you're walking; you can plan your work - and if the youngsters can listen on their 3MP players (is that what they're called?) to that noise which they seem to think is music, I'm sure you can listen to Verdi. You might even gain some street cred with them, as long as they don't realise it's Verdi.

Thursday after Second Sunday of Lent

Mother Agnes:

Tell me what's on your mind this morning, Father Fred. Is something the matter?

Father Fred:

Not really - or rather, I suppose there is ... not that I should bother you with such trivialities.

A: Go on, sometimes things that seem insignificant can be quite revealing.

F: I've just replied to a woman who had complained that we hadn't been flexible enough with regard to the date and time of her baby son's christening. She had already booked the caterers for a particular date, but I had to tell her that it wasn't possible to do the christening then. She left me a message saying that the Church was being too high-handed and who was the Church for anyway?

I then left her a message in which I told her that you don't just book a church as one might book caterers or a hotel. However, I now regret the tone I used - and I'm feeling frustrated that you can't delete messages that you've left on someone else's answering machine. But there again, I was feeling very tired, and so I'm sure God has forgiven me, even if you, Reverend Mother, aren't as sympathetic.

A: My dear Father Fred, is that really God forgiving you or you forgiving yourself?

It's so tempting to take advantage of the fact that when you speak into someone's answering machine they are not there to answer you directly. So do try harder to think before you speak in such situations. It's good practice for when you're face to face with people.

Sometimes the impulse to express feelings of frustration or anger gets the better of us. So make a new effort, Father, even - indeed especially - when you're tired, to hold back for a few seconds when you realise that you may be tempted to say something that you might regret afterwards. It's not easy, I know - but you have to do your best to keep your mind in control of your tongue.

Now go home, ring her up, and sort it out before she tells the whole family.

Friday after the Second Sunday of Lent

Father Fred:

I might stop coming to you.

Mother Agnes:

Is it all becoming a little too hard, Father?

F: No - but I've just discovered that you can go to internet confessions sites and have your confessions heard online.

A: Did I hear you say 'heard'?

F: Well ... not really 'heard', I suppose, but dealt with.

A: So I've been 'dealing with' your confessions, then, as you see it? Does that mean that you 'deal with' parishioners who come to see you?

- F: You know what I mean...anyway, you can apparently make confessions in the comfort and privacy of your own home...saves on the carbon footprint, moreover.
- A: So you haven't heard of the huge energy requirement of all these internet data servers, then, Father? I was beginning to get the impression that you thought of yourself as being rather techno-savvy.
- F: No, I'm just trying to keep up with the modern age. And by the way, it's MP3 players, not 3MP. But seriously, I do so much of my ministry by email now, that it seems perfectly natural to make cyber-confessions. After all, I'm not really confessing to you, but to God. What difference does it make, as long as I grow spiritually?
- A: 'A time for the internet, and a time for people', Father. Get the balance right, and learn when over-indulgence in the internet becomes like chasing the wind. Never let virtual communication take over completely. I imagine that 'dealing with' all your emails is distracting you from pastoral visiting, moreover? And didn't you know that the Vatican has pronounced against online confessions?

Go and visit someone who's housebound and let the emails wait.

Saturday after the Second Sunday of Lent

Father Fred:

I had some time off yesterday, Mother, and thought I would take you at your word when you said I should attend to my physical condition.

Mother Agnes:

Really? I look forward to seeing the results sometime.

F: Can't you see my newly relaxed, equable temperament? Tennis is such a sociable sport, moreover.

A: I did try it once, but the habit made it rather difficult. There does, however, seem to be something - how shall I put it - contemplative about watching tennis.

F: I'm glad you understand. It's the same when you play - at least, in principle.

A: How's that?

F: The art of successful tennis is to strike that elusive balance between relaxation in movement and heightened focus of mind; keeping your eye on the ball, not succumbing to distractions. Rather like prayer, while getting some exercise at the same time.

A: Well, Father, you're quite a modern mystic in the making. Did you win?

F: Not quite - I kept getting too tense at the critical moments.

A: A very perceptive piece of self analysis, Father Frederer. Work on it next time you play, and maybe you'll win. Tension is hard to overcome - and indeed in many areas of our lives, a key problem is that we become tense without realising it.

Look for someone who can tell you when you're getting too tense - it may be hard to hear this kind of advice, but it's good for you.