



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

Daily Meditations for Lent

(iv) Fourth Week of Lent

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Monday after Third Sunday of Lent

Mother Agnes:

How were your Sunday services yesterday, Father Fred?

Father Fred.

I wasn't all that pleased with them. I wish I'd had time to prepare them better. I always feel bad when things don't go smoothly - one wants to do the best for God.

A: It's reassuring to hear a clergyman say that he aims for high standards in worship. It's tempting to think that since people come to Church in their spare time, you don't have to try very hard. But what weren't you happy about?

F: It's difficult to put my finger on it ... I just had the sense that some of the things I said - you know, in the impromptu moments - were not very well thought through. That people weren't responding as they might, and that I wasn't being very clear.

A: I know that you know that preparation is vitally important, even for the impromptu moments, as you call them. But life can't always be pre-planned, nor can worship. You sometimes have to go with the spirit of what seems to be emerging of its own accord, and not be too hung up about making mistakes.

I suggest, Father, that you need to be more relaxed about being spontaneous. The risk of course is that you may say the wrong thing from time to time - welcome to the human race!

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 Third Sunday of Lent

Mother Agnes:

How was your day yesterday, Father?

Father Fred:

Very busy. There always seems to be too much to do. But I suppose that's what keeps the Church in being - busyness. Or should I say "business" - it amounts to the same thing.

A: Yes, I know exactly what you mean. This does tend to be rather a problem for you, doesn't it?

F: I suppose so. But at least it keeps one's mind off the nagging feeling of being spiritually unsettled - that one's own life isn't really very adequate or holy. This makes one unsure whether one is fit to lead others in their spiritual life.

A: What do you mean?

F: I mean - I suppose - that there are so many areas of my life in which I know I let other people down, and let God down. Even if I convinced myself that it didn't really matter, that God loves us all and forgives us all, I'm sure I would become complacent. In fact I think I usually am - which just makes matters worse.

A: Stop taking yourself so seriously! This is just as much a sin as being too frivolous with the spiritual life. We all have large parts of our life which we would rather not talk about or even think about. We prefer not to dwell on the fact that God always knows what is going on in our hearts and minds. But we still have to get on with life. Even the work of being a priest shouldn't be held up by self-doubt - otherwise you will be letting down those you serve.

So keep your precious inadequacies in perspective. God has far more serious crimes to worry about. Of course His love and compassion are unending - you've surely told people this many, many times. Don't, of course, give up the fight against sin, or pretend it doesn't exist. But don't, on the other hand, be too proud to receive God's grace - you owe it to your parishioners to be just as ready to receive His forgiveness as you say that they should be.

Wednesday after Third Sunday of Lent

Mother Agnes:

You seem unusually cheerful this morning, Father Fred. How very inappropriate for this season of penitence.

Father Fred:

Yes, I do feel rather satisfied with myself. Last night I went to an excellent dinner party; the food was of the highest quality, and the people were charming. I had several very constructive conversations about the Church.

A: I'm surprised to hear you being quite so effusive about a social event of this kind during Lent.

F: I see your point. But we have to take every opportunity to spread the gospel; and when one is invited to gatherings with important people - well, it would be wrong to miss them. They do seem interested in what we have to say, you know.

A: Speaking cynically, one could argue that it makes a change for them to talk to a vicar rather than to another businessman or landowner. Everyone has some curiosity about spiritual things, and the Church is a relatively easy topic of conversation.

F: Ah, but you misunderstand me! Much of my missionary work involves taking people as they are, in the places where they live, work, and socialise, turning conversations towards God. The rich and powerful have just as much need of God as anyone else.

A: I can see that you are tireless in your labours for the gospel, and your zeal for turning even a social event in your time off into a missionary opportunity is commendable. Don't give it up.

But don't become too fascinated by wealth and power. These have corrupted the Church since the time of Judas. Make sure you spend enough time with those people who don't give you so much in return, where the conversation is harder work, and you have less in common. Not just the grateful poor, who will be just as polite to you as those who hold dinner parties. But seek out those where it is difficult to find topics of conversation, where there seems to be most work to be done to turn conversations to spiritual matters.

Thursday after Third Sunday of Lent

Mother Agnes:

I sometimes wonder, Father Fred, why a self-giving priest like you should have ended up in a notable and successful parish like your present one.

Father Fred:

So do I! When one is ordained, one has all kinds of hopes and dreams about doing good in some challenging area of the world. Mind you, in practice that's what curacies are for - until one has to resign oneself to the realities of church management.

A: So you are disappointed, then, Father, about where you now are?

F: Actually no, but I sometimes want to spend all my time making a difference to people's lives rather than in church administration.

A: I know from our previous conversations, Father, that you like the feeling of doing good to people. Are there certain places where people are more receptive to having good done to them than in others?

F: Don't make fun of something I know is a weakness, Reverend Mother. After years of trying to help others, one needs some sense that one's ministry is worthwhile. And of course, some people's needs - spiritual, pastoral, and physical - are greater than others. It's understandable if one wants to go where the needs are greatest, and for one to feel frustrated if this isn't possible.

A: But how can you tell whose needs, as you put it, are greatest? Are you not in danger of going along rather unthinkingly with the general belief that people who live in poverty and deprivation have greater spiritual needs than others? How can you be the judge of this? What do you make of the teaching "Blessed are the poor ..."? Perhaps you are actually looking for the glamour that comes from helping people - such as the poor - whose troubles are particularly dramatic. Maybe, Father, you should be content to tread the harder path of ministry to those whose material security has made it more difficult for them to see God.

Friday after the Third Sunday of Lent

Mother Agnes:

How flexible do you think you are, Father, about the way things should be done?

Father Fred:

Reasonably so - when you are managing an organisation, however small, you need to allow people scope to do things their own way.

A: So you don't mind if the results of this aren't always as you would wish?

- F: Well of course it depends - it depends on how important the matter in question actually is.
- A: Would you say, then, that you are a "controlling" kind of person?
- F: Not really - in fact it's easier to let people do things their own way as far as possible. Indeed if one tries to control people too much a church would soon cease to function effectively.
- A: It seems to me however, Father, that you can be inclined to avoid giving proper leadership.

Of course you shouldn't be a dictator. But the opposite extreme is just as harmful - for any organisation, not just the Church. It is relatively easy to let people get on with things in their own way, calling this "empowerment" or attributing whatever emerges to the unpredictability of the Holy Spirit.

What I suggest you need to do is to work out what leadership means. Leadership does not have to be authoritarian; it is to do with giving a sense of direction, ensuring that people have a vision, and helping them to be motivated to work together in pursuit of that vision.

Saturday after the Third Sunday of Lent

Father Fred:

There never seems to be enough time to do all the things I want to do, including preparing my Lenten meditations. Especially when the Diocese insists that you go on training days at this busy time of the year.

Mother Agnes:

That's the bane of today's world, isn't it. We are so focussed on 'doing' that we lose sight of 'being' - of being in the presence of God and revealing God to others thereby.

F: They were always going on about that at theological college. That's why so many churches have fallen into decline and even closed; too much 'being' and not enough 'doing'.

A: I'm sure you know, Father, that the Anglican Church has for centuries commended the 'Middle Way' - the way of balance and moderation. Not too much busyness but not too much laziness either.

F: Ah, yes, the good old tradition of the genteel vicarage tea party. You've summed it up admirably.

A: Don't make fun of what is a serious point. Lent should be a time for getting your life back into balance, Father. Get on with your work, do it efficiently, without becoming too obsessed by perfection, and then you'll have more time to pray and be with people.

F: Your wish is my command.