

V. CAPÁNAGA, *Agustín de Hipona. Maestro de la conversión cristiana*, (BAC) Madrid 1974, 417-420

LENT

For the Church, the liturgical cycle of the mysteries of the Lord signifies the consecration and sanctification of time, totally opposed to the cosmic cycles of ancient philosophy¹ Against the endless rotation of centuries without hope, which is like the endless wheel of misery, the Church introduced Easter, having as its central event the Resurrection of the Lord, and the hope of the resurrection of the whole human kind. Such is the greatest revolution of history, which already orders and leads the times in Christ giving it a spiritual context that the pagans never had, nor does time have among Muslims and Hindus. Our time is filled with Christ, and for this reason we call it Christian.

St. Augustine, therefore, situating himself in the middle of this cosmic event, divides or accepts the division of time into two sections: before and after Easter. The first is of temptation, struggle and sorrow; the second, of victory and joy. “This time of misery and our groan signifies Lent before Easter, and the next fifty days dedicated to the divine praise represent the time of rejoicing, of rest and gladness, of eternal life, of the kingdom without end which has not yet come.

There are, therefore, two times; one, before the Resurrection of the Lord; another, after it; one, in which we are now; another, in which we hope to be. The time of Lent, which is our present time, is one of sorrow. The Easter alleluia means the time of joy, of rest, and of the kingdom that we will possess. The praises of God are very frequent in the Church – the song of alleluia- to signify the endless praises of the future kingdom.

The passion of the Lord represents our time, in which we are now. “The scourging, the chains, the abuse, the spittle, the crown of thorns, the wine mixed with gall, the vinegar in a sponge, the jeers, the shame and contempt, finally the cross itself, the sacred limbs hanging on the tree, what does it all signify for us but the time we are living now, a time of sorrow, a time of mortality, a time of temptations? So it is a foul, and ugly time, but let it be the ugliness of dung in the field, not in the house. Let the sorrow be for sins, not for greedy desires cheated and disappointed. It’s a foul, ugly time, but if used well a fertile time. What could be more foul than a field spread with farmyard moist manure? The field was beautiful before it has received its carload of moist manure from the dunghill. The field was first reduced to ugliness, in order to attain to fruitfulness. So the ugliness of this time is a sign, but let this ugliness be for us a time of fertility.”²

¹ Cf. V. CAPÁNAGA, *Los ciclos cósmicos en la «Ciudad de Dios»*: La Ciudad de Dios 2 (El Escorial 1956) 95-112.

² *Sermo* 254,5: PL 38,1184.

Although every Christian time, while we still live in this world, has its Lenten characteristic in the sense we have mentioned, Christian Lenten season comprises a limited period of days in preparation for the feast of Easter which was celebrated with great solemnity during the time of the Bishop of Hippo. ‘The solemn time has arrived that I must recommend to your charity so that you may ponder more seriously about your soul and corporal penance. Because these are the most holy forty days in the whole world in which, as Easter approaches, everybody whom God reconciles with Him in Christ, celebrates with praiseworthy devotion.’³

This solemn exordium of a Lenten sermon indicates very well the seriousness with which the Church fostered reconciliation of Christians with God. An essential thought of Lent was the mystery of human redemption brought about by Christ, and which should be performed by Christians with spiritual and corporal collaboration.

The Saint places humility as the foundation of Lenten spirituality: “Because this time of humility signified by these days of the life itself of this world, in which Christ, our Lord, who died in our place, in a certain sense suffers again every year with the return of this solemnity. Because what he did once and for all in time so that our life could be renewed, is celebrated every year in order bring it to our memory. If, therefore, during this time of our humility, living in the midst of temptations, we must be humble, how much more during these days, in which we not only do by living the time of our humility, but we express it with a celebration? The humility of Christ taught us to be humble, because he gave himself to death for the impious, the greatness of Christ makes us great, because by rising up from the dead, he went ahead to our piety.”⁴

Therefore, the Christian must participate in the Passion and Resurrection of Christ. Through the humility of the Passion, to the glory of the Resurrection: here is the spiritual itinerary of Christian Lent.

Therefore, the Cross is raised during this time, not only as sign of redemption, but also as banner of Christian militia: “And every Christian should always remain nailed on this Cross during the entire life that he/she lives in the midst of temptations.”⁵

What is the spiritual program for this time? It is one of a more abundant spiritual nourishment through meditation of the word of God, or let us say of eternal truths, and of

³ *Sermo* 209,1 (PL 38,1046): «Solemne tempus advenit, quando de anima attentius cogitanda et corpore castigando vestram commoneam charitatem».

⁴ *Sermo* 206,1: PL 38,1041.

⁵ *Sermo* 205.1 (PL 39,1039): «In hac quidem cruce, per totam istam vitam, quae in mediis tentationibus, dicitur, perpetuo debet pendere christianus». Ibid.: «Crux ista non quadraginta dierum est, sed totius huius vitae». Cf. MA 1350; MAI 9.

crucifixion mortification of the body, signified, above all, by fasting. The Scripture offers us three types of Lenten penance in three personages or landmarks in the history of our salvation: Moses, Elijah and Christ. They teach us that “in the same way as in the Law and in the Prophets and in Christ, we must not conform ourselves or be attached to this world, but crucify our old self, not to walk in orgies or drunkenness, not in promiscuity and licentiousness, not in rivalry and jealousy. But we should put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the desires of the flesh (*Rom 13:13-14*). Live like this always, O Christian!; if you do not wish to be submerged in the mud of the earth, do not come down from that Cross. And that is how one must live, above all, during this Lenten season, in the hope of a new life.”⁶

Lent has a basic meaning for Christian life: as a renunciation of the inordinate desires of the world. It is the baptismal obligation itself with the abnegation of worldly vanities: “It is recommended to us that in our conduct, while we live here in this world, to abstain from the greed of this world; this is what is indicated by the fasting of this time known to all by the name of Lent.”⁷

The duty of this time is reduced to the meditation on the word of God, to bodily mortification, signified in a particular manner by fasting; to works of mercy. The Church recommends more prayer during this time: “During these days dedicate yourselves to more frequent and ardent prayers.”⁸ The purpose is to achieve humility and sorrow for sins,⁹ or what the Saint calls *in gemitu laborare*.¹⁰ The groan of prayer acknowledges two things: the sense of sins and being away from the homeland during the pilgrimage. To ponder over the misery of sin and the absence of God and of the greatest goods that we hope for in the future life gives to the season of Lent its mark of austerity.

That is why the memory of the Passion of Christ animates this entire program, because the anniversary of the commemoration of the works of Christ in the Passion reminds us of the temporal condition of Christian existence, subject to so many temptations, and confirms us in the hope of forgiveness.

⁶ *Sermo* 205,3: PL 38,1040.

⁷ *Sermo* 270,3: PL 38,1240.

⁸ *Sermo* 210,5: PL 38,1050.

⁹ *Sermo* 210,4 (PL 38,20491): «In gemitu orationis e, castigatione corpus humiliat ex fide non ficta».

¹⁰ *Sermo* 205,2: PL 38,1040.

St. Augustine also gives great importance to the exercise of the works of mercy, and dedicates a Lenten sermon to forgiveness of offenses.¹¹ A man who hates is a dark prison for himself; his heart is his prison.¹² For this reason he comments on the words of St. John: *He who does not love his brother is still in the dark.*¹³ This exercise is necessary for Christians during their life, but it is during Lent when they must purify their heart, and St. Augustine never gets tired of repeating that it is one of the Lenten exercises that must always be kept in mind:

“Pay attention all of you, men and women, big and small, laity and clergy, and I also am addressing myself. Let us all listen, let us all fear, If we have done something against our brothers, let us do what the Father has commanded us, because he will also be our judge; let us ask forgiveness from all those whom perhaps we have offended and hurt with our faults.”¹⁴ The exercise of mutual forgiveness was very necessary in the Diocese of Hippo, because the Africans were vindictive.

It is already known that corporal fasting was the universal practice of the Church, with the deprivation of both licit and illicit things: Let us punish our body and let us reduce it to slavery; and, in order that our rebellious passions may not drag us to do illicit things, but in order to dominate them let us deprive ourselves also of licit things.¹⁵

Because what is taken away from the body must also be distributed to the needy, because fasting will not benefit the one who does it without the practice of mercy.¹⁶ The Saint frequently unites these three things: fasting, prayer and almsgiving, as means of preparing oneself for Easter: “One must give alms, fast and pray in order to conquer the temptations of the world, the snares of the devil, the burdens of life, the temptations of the flesh, temporal turbulence and every kind of physical and spiritual adversity.”¹⁷

All this Lenten asceticism is proper for all times; that is why St. Augustine compares Lent to human pilgrimage which advances in this world among contradictions, fatigues and struggles which will come to an end with the peace of Easter.

¹¹ *Sermo* 211: PL 38,1054-58. Cf. *Sermo* 208,2: PL 38,1045; *Sermo* 209,1: PL 38,1046..

¹² *Sermo* 211,2 (PL 38,1055): «Noli illum putare sine carcere esse; carcer eius cor eius est».

¹³ *In Io.* 3, 15.

¹⁴ *Sermo* 211,5: PL 38,1056.

¹⁵ *Sermo* 207,2: PL 38,1043.

¹⁶ *Sermo* 207,1 (PL 38,1043): «Quia ieiunium sine misericordia ci nihil est qui ieiunat».

¹⁷ *Sermo* 207,1: PL 38,1042.

