

Can We

emphasis on prayer but of final exams and the end of the term. Both have a certain apocalyptic tenor, but they are very different.

falling in the tenth month.⁶

prayer. They did not have to encourage kneeling; they had to encourage the non-penitential posture of standing. This is why the Sundays in Lent are “in” Lent. The people had been repenting so hard for the other six days that Sunday was supposed to be a relaxation of repentance.

A Comparison to the World of Today

Consider how different our situation is. A Lenten Sunday is likely the only time most of our people will ever even think about—let alone engage in—any penitential action. Even that might simply be limited to noting that an observant liturgical planner has omitted the hymn of praise and “Alleluias” from the service. Rather than our seasons of Advent and Lent giving voice to a powerful cultural impulse to repentant action, we are often in the role of having to teach repentance and encourage it. Our people have not been excessively repentant. On the contrary, they have been altogether too indulgent of passions, desires, and vices. They come to church—if they come at all—blithely unaware of the gravity of their sin and certainly not connecting their modern problems (aching back, tanking retirement account, or marital troubles, for example) to their need to repent and get right with God. They may come lonely, afraid, and hopeless, but they do not perceive that fasting, penitential vows, self-denial, and other tradition acts of penitence associated with Advent are the proper course of action. These troubling parts of their lives are perceived as the results of poor choices or circumstances—maybe genetics or financial forces—beyond our control. They come perhaps with an aggrieved sense of entitlement; certainly they come needy, happy for help, but not gripped by a penitential impulse which can be expressed liturgically and which the liturgy and worship of the Church needs to channel and constrain.

We are left, however, with seasons which are originally designed to meet that very different

But what of Advent's original works of penitence? My proposal does not mean jettisoning the Advent emphasis on penitence, but I do think we need to relocate it out of the Advent season. I say that because the culture continues to recognize the necessity of these penitential acts and has even provided us with an alternative season of penitence associated with Christmas. This season, however, begins in the days immediately after the Feast of Christmas, not before it.

Consider the actions of penitence. When we repent, we consider our life and its need for reform. We make a vow, a promise to do better,

immensely popular. One did not become a superstar through Instagram in ancient world. One did something dramatic like sitting on a pole for decades. Simeon had to move to increasingly higher

First of all, we need to note the modern conception of repentance and how that also differs from the repentance to which the Holy Spirit continues to call people. We will have to be aware that some will hear this word repent and have in mind something utterly different from the repentance for which Jesus calls. This would seemingly manifest in a therapeutic understanding of my repentance in which my problems are not sins before God but simply unhealthy practices, thoughts, or attitudes. They are not sins which render me unholy and in need to God’s gracious forgiveness.

Second, we will need to pay attention to how this will alter the way we celebrate Christmas and Epiphany. There are cherished and important traditions for any worshipping community involved here. As I note above, incarnational themes found in Christmas and penitential themes found in Epiphany are already giving us opportunity to step into a penitential mode. But we will need to have a care to remember the cherished elements of those seasons. This penitence needs its place, but it cannot occupy the whole space.

Third, I would not like us to repent of Christmas. Too often New Year’s Resolutions manifest a sort of puritanical forswearing of all fun after a season of too much fun. But festivals need to be times of excess and joy. Don’t repent of that. Repent of the life which knows only indulgence and nothing else. That life is not satisfied with Christmas joy, but always wants more and more. Or it finds that Christmas joy commercially observed was empty or shallow.

Fourth, the Church has already attempted to deal with this liturgically. I just don’t think it has worked very well. The liturgical reforms of Vatican II—especially the adoption of a three year lectionary—has created a quasi-penitential season at the end of the church year, the three weeks in November which precede the Last Sunday of the Church Year/Feast of Christ the King. The eschatological focus here is alive and well, but the Christmas anticipation, Thanksgiving celebration, and cultural biases against penitence undermine its ability to inculcate the sort of penitential action this paper envisions. Rather, I think this ought to be seen as another preparatory or undergirding element of the post-Christmas penitential season. The eschaton needs to be lurking in the background and sometimes the foreground of penitence. This will not go on forever. There is an end, an accounting of things.

Conclusion

Any such proposal as this needs e5(oy)6.88 Tm0 g0 G{A}22(T259.67 Tm0 g0 Gs12 0 612 792 re2 792 re

