Conrad Pepler's 'Lent'

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Fr. Conrad Pepler, sometime editor of *Blackfriars* and *Life of the Spirit*, the ancestral pair from which *New Blackfriars* springs, was an outstanding spiritual theologian among a uniquely gifted generation of the English Dominicans.[1] In a period when 'ascetical and mystical theology' was generally separated from the theology of the Liturgy (to the disadvantage of both), he was keen to see the journey of the soul to God within the landscape of the Church's worship. His exploration of the meaning of the Lenten season is a case in point.

Fr. Conrad's *Lent*, his first published book, takes the form, as its subtitle tells us, of a 'Liturgical Commentary on the Lessons and Gospels'.[2] Obviously, the Lectionary which Fr. Conrad used was that of the pre-Conciliar Roman liturgy, more specifically the Lectionary of St. Pius V, the Dominican pope who, in the wake of the Council of Trent, had reformed the liturgical books of the Western rite. In 1969, in response to the appeal of the Council fathers of Vatican II that 'a more representative portion of the Scriptures be read to the people over a set cycle of years', Pope Paul VI replaced the Pian Lectionary with another of his own, or rather his experts', devising. Although there are continuities between these two scriptural anthologies there are also discontinuities which, clearly enough, reduce the value of Fr. Conrad's book as a Lenten companion. Really, it is only utilisable by those congregations of the faithful or religious communities which still cling to the earlier liturgical pattern, thanks to Pope John Paul II's clement interventions to assist them. It was from the Pian Lectionary and no other that Fr. Conrad tried, as he put it, to 'unravel a consistent and orderly doctrine'.[3] On the other hand, enough of the readings remain the same in the two Lectionaries for what he called 'many points essential to the attaining of the spirit of Lent' to remain equally accessible to those using the Pauline Lectionary of 1969; and some of the readings that occur in both books retain their same dating within the forty days between Ash Wednesday and Easter.

In order to contextualise Fr. Conrad's commentary it may be useful to say something about the origins and development of Lent and its readings cycle.[4] The celebration of Lent arises from two distinct sources: one is the short-but-sharp purificatory fast kept immediately before Easter as early as the third century; the other is a slightly less antique fast

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of forty days, which came into use in Egypt as a way of commemorating Jesus' own fasting in the Wilderness. In a very short time, these two fasts, which we can call the 'Paschal Fast' and the 'Lenten Fast', came together, and were celebrated as a single continuous liturgical season initiated by a recollection of the Temptations in the Wilderness and consummated on Easter Day. In the Roman liturgy, both of Fr. Conrad's day and our own, the distinction between the two is still maintained to some degree through the keeping of *Laetare* or 'mid-Lent' Sunday, after which the readings at Mass cease to be predominantly about prayer, fasting and almsgiving, and the need for fundamental conversion which these practices symbolise, and turn with increasing insistency to consider the Lord's approaching Passion and the Christian's privilege of entering into union with Jesus' own suffering and death. To understand the further development of Lent, two more points must be noticed. Once the adult catechumenate had become a well-organised affair, by the fourth century, the now united Lenten and Paschal fasts, leading up to Easter, seemed the ideal framework for the initiation of new Christians. So Lent became the time for the final preparation of catechumens for their Baptism, Confirmation and First Communion at the Easter Vigil. The vigil also appeared a highly suitable moment for reconciling to full communion with the Church those who were doing public penance for 'mortal' sins—major departures from the Christian life. So Lent was a time too for getting the penitents ready for full re-integration with the Church (though in fact at Rome this was done on Holy Thursday, at the *beginning* of the Easter triduum rather than its close). Seen in the perspective of the historian of the Liturgy, then: by the fifth century, when the lectionary cycle of the Church at Rome for the Lenten season was largely in place, Lent had four characteristics: it was, firstly, a time of fasting, almsgiving and prayer for the whole Christian people; secondly, for catechumens, it was a time for completing the preliminaries of Baptism; thirdly, for penitents, it was a time of getting reading for reconciliation with the Church, and finally, for everyone alike, it was a time of preparing for the celebration of the Lord's Passover especially in its closing weeks—the week beginning with Laetare Sunday, known as the *mediana*, or week of the 'midway turn', and the two succeeding weeks of Passiontide, of which the last, the Great of Holy Week had an especially intense character in this respect.[5] When at the start of the sixth century four more fasting days were added before the first Sunday of Lent to compensate for the fact that Sundays themselves were exempted from fasting, the structure of Lent as known in the twentieth century Western church (whether before the Second Vatican Council or after it) was essentially complete.

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The Pian and Pauline Lectionaries (those used by the Fr. Conrad of the 1940s and ourselves, respectively) agree on some important points, such as the Gospels of Ash Wednesday, and of the First and Second Sundays of Lent, as well as of a few Lenten weekdays. The main differences between them are twofold. First, the Gospels of the Third, Fourth and Fifth Sundays of Lent, those of the Samaritan Woman, The Man Born Blind, and the Raising of Lazarus, all of which were crucial to the Lenten preparation of catechumens, have been restored to their former high honour from the weekdays to which they were shunted when adult Baptism ceased to be the rule (though in point of fact, the new Lectionary's insistence on maintaining a three-year cycle of Gospels at all points means that these are only read optionally two years out of the three). Secondly, the compilers of the Pauline lectionary have produced many new twosomes of Old Testament lection with corresponding New Testament Gospel, to replace those found in its Pian predecessor—though sometimes the superiority of the selection is not so evident.

Fr. Conrad's *Lent*, written at a time when many of the most notable liturgical historians of French- and German-speaking Europe were producing their pioneering work, is well-informed on the historical background of its subject. He clearly considered the most important discovery of the historians of the Liturgy to be the distinction between the Lenten fast proper (from Ash Wednesday to Laetare Sunday) and the Paschal fast (from the Monday of the Fourth Week of Lent to Easter), it is on the basis of this distinction that his book is constructed. As he put it:

> The Lenten spirit and message are summed up in two doctrines, Christian penance and Christ's Passion, which divide the entire forty days into two equal parts.[6]

During the first of those periods, the Church's theme is 'personal mortification and the individual aspect of Lenten observance'. But Lent as a whole is not concerned with 'my actions so far as they belong to me'; rather does it 'direct attention away from self'.[7] During Lent we are to become ecstatic: that is, be taken out of ourselves. The purpose of fasting, prayer and almsgiving, and the spirit of mortification which should 'enliven' them (a paradoxical choice of word because etymologically 'mortification' means to bring death) is a better understanding and appreciation of the Passion of Christ. Citing in turn Mother Julian of Norwich and the Letter to the Galatians he writes:

> It is to Calvary that we are going, for it is there we shall find the perfection of our own individual lives; and at the end of our journey together our 'pains shall be turned into everlasting joy by the virtue of

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Christ's passion', and we shall be able to cry triumphantly with St. Paul, With Christ I am nailed to the Cross. And I live, now not I; but Christ liveth in me.[8]

The second most important find of liturgical archaeology in Fr. Conrad's eyes was the relation between Lent on the one hand, and, on the other, the administration of Baptism, 'Second Baptism' or Penance, Confirmation and the Holy Eucharist—since, as we have seen, the Lenten Liturgy contained the doctrinal and ascetical preparation of catechumens and penitents for the Easter reception of all four of these sacraments. He constantly, and with perfect scholarly rectitude, refers to the significance of the Church's choice of readings for these two groups in particular.

So far, then, we have two themes: the merging of mortification into the contemplation of Christ's Passion, above all in its victorious aspect as the ground of the Resurrection triumph, and a making ready for the fruitful reception of the sacraments—sacraments to be received from a variety of motives. The latter may be mainly negative, to do with human sinfulness, in the case of Baptism and Penance, more neutral, concerned with the need for strengthening, in the case of Confirmation, and overwhelmingly positive, a matter of union with God in Christ, in the case of the Holy Eucharist. Now at first sight these two themes, one which concerns the whole Christian people, and the other which focuses more specifically on catechumens and penitents, may seem only loosely connected—though it is hard to overlook altogether the fact that both move from negativity to positivity, from struggle to triumph, from darkness to light. Mortification bears some resemblance to Baptism and Penance (indeed the same word, 'penance' does service both for the ascetic practice and the sacrament), while contemplation of Christ's glorious Passion certainly enjoys a connection with the Mass.

What Fr. Conrad does in the course of his Lenten commentary is to tighten this connexion, to weave together the various coloured threads of the Lenten readings into the fabric of a harmoniously unified spiritual doctrine. Needless to say, he has also to comment on many quite particular aspects, even details, of Old and New Testament interest, on the Church doctrines these suggest, and even on the original setting of the different Lenten Masses in the specific basilicas, churches and chapels of the city of Rome. Nevertheless, he does not lose sight of the aim he set himself in the Preface, which is what he called the forming of a 'consecutive and gradually developing body of doctrine'. How does he manage to convey the impression of having achieved such an aim? My answer is, By evaluating the Lectionary, whether explicitly or implicitly, in the light of his own ascetical and mystical theology.

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Our next question must evidently be, And how did he see ascetical and mystical theology? He regarded it as, in his own words, a 'gradually developing' patrimony of spiritual doctrine, which in his own time, or so he thought, owed most to two Dominican writers who were his older contemporaries, Réginald Garrigou-Lagrange of the Province of Toulouse, and Juan Arintero of the Province of Spain, though behind them stood three elder statesmen of the Church: one of the Renaissance, one of the Middle Ages, and one of the patristic world: St. John of the Cross in sixteenth century Spain, St. Thomas Aquinas in thirteenth century France and Italy, and the shadowy figure who worked under the pseudonym of Denys the Areopagite, the co-worker of St. Paul, but who actually lived, so modern scholars believe, in fifth century Syria.

The key to the unlocking of its treasure-chest lies in a trio of terms: purgation, illumination, and union. Arising originally in the philosophical sources of the Pseudo-Denys, the Areopagite saw these terms as crucial denominators for the main stages of a Christian's growth towards God. First, we are purged of our evil habits and desires; secondly, we are illuminated, as the grace of God floods our minds and hearts; thirdly, we enter into union with him when, without losing our finitude and distinctiveness as God's creatures we nonetheless become deified by sharing adoptively in the divine sonship of Jesus Christ.

St. Thomas, though his doctrine of prayer does little to develop this scheme, nonetheless retains it, and re-affirms its relation to the sacraments, which Denys had already noted. For Baptism and Penance are sacraments of purgation, intended for beginners, including those who find they must begin again and again; Confirmation is a sacrament for those on the way, who are in the process of becoming more enlightened; and the Holy Eucharist provides an anticipation of final union with God, a sharing in the mystical marriage of the Lamb with his Bride, the Church. In St. John of the Cross, a theology drawn from the Salamanca Thomists of the Catholic Reformation is married to a deeply introspective temperament in order to produce an account of how the three degrees—purgation, illumination, union, work themselves out in a progressive fashion through different qualities and modes of personal prayer. In Garrigou-Lagrange, the three stages are given a Christological interpretation: with purgation being the application to the individual Christian of the disciples' disorientation and remorse at the Crucifixion of Christ, illumination being the application to the individual Christian of the disciples' enjoyment of the light of the risen Christ between the first Easter and the Ascension; and union being the application to the individual Christian disciples of the 'night of the spirit' between the Ascension and Pentecost, which ushered in the intimate indwelling

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within them of the Spirit of Christ, and so the final union of love. In Arintero, what we find is what Fr. Conrad called a 'ploughing...back' of the 'conclusions of the Dominican school' into the sacramental life, participation in the mysteries of the Church.[9] The divine life is developed, manifested and perfected with the mystical body of the Church by an ever deepening assimilation to Jesus Christ as he is shown forth in the liturgical celebration of his saving actions, and the spiritual and corporal works of mercy of his Church. [10] On the basis of Arintero's work—and the last Spanish Master of the Dominican Order, Aniceto Fernandez, once told the present author that, had Arintero's *Obras completas* been known more widely, the Second Vatican Council would never have been necessary. Fr. Conrad foresaw an 'entirely new type of study of "mystical theology"', one which would approach the Word of God in Scripture by the light of one single theme: the 'way to divine union within the total Christ' (Christ and his Church).[11]

This was his abiding conviction: almost at the end of his life, in a critique of the 'creation-centred spirituality' of the American Dominican (but now Episcopalian) Matthew Fox, he wrote:

> I would, of course, agree that creation is good in itself and can form the ground of 'a theology', but I would prefer to see any complete theology grounded on the 'New Creation' in and through Christ Jesus our Lord.[12]

Surely the closing words of so many prayers of the Roman Rite—*per Christum Dominum nostrum*—suggested that Christological corrective. The soul's relation to God is not to be had except by reference to the mystery of saving worship which the Liturgy resumes. But by the same token, the simple happenstance of liturgical participation (however 'active') does not suffice. In a way that is as apposite to the liturgical functionalism of post-Conciliar Catholicism as it was to the liturgical formalism of its pre-Conciliar predecessor, Conrad Pepler's *Lent* warns of the spiritual labour that is needed if the Liturgy is to become fruitful in life.

1 See my *Dominican Gallery. Portrait of a Culture* (Leominster Gracewing, 1997).
2 *Lent. A Liturgical Commentary on the Lessons and Gospels* (St. Louis, Mo. and London, B. Herder Book Co., 1944).
3 Ibid., p. iii
4 I follow here P. Jounel, 'The Easter Cycle' in A. G. Martimort, I.-H. Dalmais, P. Jounel, *The Church at Prayer*, IV, *The Liturgy and Time* (Et London, Geoffrey Chapman, 1986), pp. 65-72.
5 Strictly speaking, only the first half of Holy Week falls within Lent. The Easter Triduum begins on the evening of Holy Thursday.
6 *Lent*, op. cit., p. 1.

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7 Ibid., p. 2.
8 Ibid.
9 C. Pepler, O.P., *The Three Degrees. A Study in Christian Mysticism* (London, Blackfriars Publications, 1957), p. 112.
10 'A Christian is a social contemplative' (*Lent*, op.cit., p. 223, is, in effect, the Peplerian summary of Arintero's position.
11 *The Three Degrees*, op.cit., p. 1 12.
12 'Creation theology', in *Mystics Quarterly* XV. 2 (1989), p. 88. For Fr. Conrad's theology of re-creation in Christ, see his 'The Feast of Feasts', in idem., *Sacramental Prayer* (London, Bloomsbury Publishing Co., 1959), pp. 52-60.

Ageing into Spring

As the sense goes out
hope is tamped down
the end comes clearing into focus

I ask unhappily what
it is all about what
it adds up to

I know as soon as I have
asked it is not
my business

it is thick and vulgar
to expect answers
it is sentimental

but the feelings of loss
of disappointment
of doubt

circle like bats
crying at the edge of attention
stupid misshapen

and I still believe
in secret
love is there and the point

Michael Kelly

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