



A PREFACE TO THE LENTEN PHARMACY

Welcome to forty therapeutic days in The Lenten Pharmacy. “Therapeutic” may seem an odd adjective for a season that traditionally is observed with fasting, abstinence, and penitential denial. Yet it is appropriate to think of Lent in terms of a pharmacy, which can be either a place or a process of healing, for its origins are from the Greek pharmakon, meaning “purification through purging,” and pharmakeia, meaning “the use of drugs.” Indeed, Lent is a healing purge of anything that makes us sick in soul or body. Wholesome healing involves body and soul as a single entity since flesh and spirit are so intimately infused that the affliction of one affects the other.

The word “salvation” originally had secular meanings of freedom and healing, and the same was true of “savior,” which comes from the Greek soter, meaning “healer.” The gospels relate how Jesus as a savior-healer tended sicknesses of body and soul. To say that Jesus is my savior primarily means that he is my healer, physician, and pharmacist. Since disease and sickness have always been with us, pharmaceutical healing arose in the most ancient of societies. The Sumerians, who

once lived in present-day Iraq, more than five thousand years ago developed many of our still-existing medical treatments, including inhalations, pills, enemas, infusions, lotions, ointments, and even the equivalent of our modern aspirin, in the form of natural willow bark.

The symbols used for pharmacy include a large letter R, with its right leg crossed by a slanted bar. **Rx** The most frequent explanation for this symbol is that it is an abbreviation of the Latin *recipere* or “recipe,” meaning “take thou.” In former times the Latin *fiat mistura*, meaning “let a mixture be made,” followed this. The grinding of herbs and drugs required the skill of a pharmacist, whose mixing bowl and pestle have become symbols of this profession. As late as 1920, druggists ground and mixed 80 percent of the prescriptions they filled, but by 1971 that number had decreased to 1 percent or less. Not until the 1800s was a medical distinction made between an apothecary and pharmacist, who mixes medicines, and a physician or doctor, who treats a patient with medicine.

The Lenten Pharmacy is a manual of medicinal reflections on Jesus, the Galilean Healer’s prescriptions for alleviating the various crippling afflictions of body and soul. These daily reflections include Jesus’ instructions for how to live a healthy and holy life. Some of these prescriptions will seem difficult or unpalatable, like bitter medicine. But all will lead to real and abundant life. May the following ancient and new prescriptions aid the healing of your body and spirit as you visit daily your lenten pharmacy.



ASH WEDNESDAY

Today your lenten pharmacy offers the remedial application of inert gray ashes. Not normally used as a medicine, the seemingly useless residue of a fire warrants a closer look as a possible pharmaceutical treatment.

For the ancients, ashes vividly symbolized what results when the life-fire has departed from a body. This stark image of death was reflected in the ritual words used upon administering blessed ashes in ages past: *Pulvis es, in pulverem reverteris*—“Dust thou art, and to dust thou shall return.” Lent itself was originally a penitential season of reconciliation with the church—ashes and sackcloth being the visible signs of repentant sinners who were seeking public reunion with the church. Along with fasting, ashes were a sign of mourning and grief at times of death. In times of disaster, they served as physical offerings of supplication to God. Christian ascetics used to sprinkle ashes on their food to indicate their total disdain for the pleasures of the body. The ancient Mayans of Central America used ashes as an inoculation against disease, much like a flu shot. When planting corn, they mixed in ashes to protect their seeds from blight and rotting.

ASH WEDNESDAY



Now, you are not a sinner seeking public reconciliation and quite likely you are not planting corn or mourning the death of a loved one, so how can today's ashes be good medicine for you? You can start by letting today's ashes vaccinate your seeds of reform against maggots "tomorrowitis," that procrastination fungus that postpones a reform of life until next year's Lent or even until your deathbed. The pharmacist-healer Jesus says to all those suffering from lethargic encephalitis, the deadening inflammation of the brain that is so common in our culture: "Stay awake. Seek healing this very day, for you do not know if you will be alive tomorrow. Now is the hour to awaken."

Ashes are also an ageless remedy for sickly prayer. Abraham of old practiced this prayer remedy when he said, "Let me take it upon myself to speak to my Lord, I who am but dust and ashes" (Gn 18:27). When daring to beg favors from the Undying Font of Mercy, Abraham laced his humble prayer with the ashes of his own grave. Lying in the dust of one's death-rest is an antidote to the hubris and hyperactivity that mark our contemporary way of life. Praying from such a position of humility heals the soul with true justification—just as it did for the tax collector praised by Jesus in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector:

The tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!"
—Lk 18:13

Here is a good Ash Wednesday prescription: Slowly read aloud this parable of Jesus found in Luke 18:9–14.

Because of infirmity, family obligations, or work-related responsibilities, you may not be able to go to church today and be marked with ashes. But do not let that prevent you from being touched by this powerful ancient medicine. All the earth is holy land and its soil is blessed. So, place a small pinch of dust or dirt in the palm of your hand and use it to trace upon yourself the sign of the cross, a sign of death that leads to new life, as you prayerfully ask God to heal you.



FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT

In today's gospel reading, Jesus, led by the Spirit of God, walks away from his work and responsibilities to take the desert cure (see Mk 1:12–15). A Palestinian proverb in his day was “Physician, heal thyself,” and by this withdrawal into the wilderness we might wonder if Jesus is seeking the healing of desert medicine. Alone in the desolate wilderness inhabited by evil spirits and wild beasts, without food or water, and stripped of the security of his fellow villagers and companions, God alone becomes his sustenance! It appears that the desert purges Jesus of the infection of self-sufficiency; indeed, from that time onward God is the sole source of his strength. For Jesus, desert isolation is a *pharmakon*, as it forces him to confront his utter dependency on God. Independence comes only with adulthood and is a goal we work hard to reach. Yet independence can be like an eye infection, blinding us to the reality that even our every breath is dependent upon God, the source of all life.

Jesus began his teaching by saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news”(Mk 1:15). Good doctors take their own medicine. By going into the wilderness and purging himself of his family and village support system, Jesus learned to trust in

God as a continuously caring, protecting, and loving parent. We proudly independent Americans find purging ourselves of independence painfully difficult and logically ask, “Isn’t there an easier way?” The answer comes in the words of the former British prime minister, Margaret Thatcher, whose favorite response to her objectors was: “TINA,” There Is No Alternative.

Lent is TINA time. There is no alternative to Jesus’ requirements to repent—to turn around—and believe in the good news; that is, if you wish to be his disciple. Conversion is no brief forty-day exercise; it is a lifetime practice of returning/repenting that requires an ongoing bit-by-bit purging of anything in us that isn’t godly. On Ash Friday, you were invited to make a list of your pet faults. Now, on this first Sunday of Lent, make a list of three pet self-set limitations. These growth boundaries mark how you’ve embraced or settled for who you are instead of seeking who you can become.

Lent is the season of becoming and of removing the restrictive boundaries that seriously limit our growth, the fullness of life, and the depths of our souls. On this desert Sunday, begin purging your pet limitations as well as those self-established boundaries you have placed on your prayer, patience, forgiveness, generosity, and care of the poor.



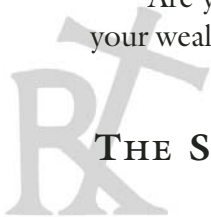


FRIDAY OF THE SECOND WEEK IN LENT

There's a threadbare story about an old Vermont farmer who, when asked if he believed in original sin, answered, "Believe in it? I've seen it!" Even a glance at our global reality reveals evidence of the unbelievable evil that humans inflict on one another. The old farmer said he'd seen it and so have we: the diabolical evils of war, racial and religious violence, exploitation of the poor, and the neglect of the homeless and hungry by the wealthy and comfortable, just to name a few.

Giving alms and caring for the poor are among the traditional works of Lent and need to be at the heart of our ongoing religious disciplines. Lent should be a time for an audit of our financial books—a time to be evaluated on how well we have administered the monies entrusted to our care by God. While we may think that all the money we've earned is our personal property, that's not the fiscal ethic of the gospels where Jesus says, "From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required" (Lk 12:48).

Are you financially healthy? Are you a generous sharer of your wealth with those who are in need? Does your care of the



poor reflect the norm of generosity in the United States? Many of us think of America as being the most generous nation in terms of feeding the starving and giving aid to the poor countries of the world. In reality, however, while being the richest country, America ranks last among the top twenty developed nations in donating to the poor and sick of the world! Allow that shocking fact to challenge you to examine the depth of your generosity in response to your solemn duty to feed the poor, cloth the naked, and give shelter to the homeless (see Mt 25:37–38).

Besides almsgiving and caring for the poor, another traditional work of Lent is fasting. At various times in history, this ascetic practice was taken to radical extremes. Some ascetics would fast to the point of near starvation, something no responsible person today would praise or encourage. Paradoxically, spiritual fasting to the edge of starvation can help to cure our sins. A story will help to explain this:

Once, an old Cherokee told his grandson about the great fight going on inside of him. It was a conflict between two wolves. One wolf was his urge to anger, envy, greed, arrogance, self-pity, revenge, false pride, and resentment. The other wolf, the old man said, was his inclination to live in joy, peace, hope, and love, to be generous, humble, compassionate, and trusting of all humankind. When he was finished, the grandson asked, “Which wolf wins, grandfather?” His reply was simply, “The one I feed.”

Which of your wolves is winning? Perhaps it’s time to starve one. . . .



FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT

“**N**ow my soul is troubled,” Jesus laments in the gospel of this Sunday before Palm Sunday (Jn 12:20–33). “And what should I say: Father, save me from this hour?” His head must have ached from the pounding of conflicting thoughts—on the one hand, embracing whatever God and his destiny required and, on the other hand, his natural self-preservation that urged him to save himself. As a patient in this agony, Jesus may have felt like the woman whose doctor asked her, “Where does it hurt?” Looking up at him with a grimace, she answered, “Oh doctor, where doesn’t it hurt?” Plato taught that physical pain is also experienced by the soul. Those who experience intense pain know that their souls ache as much as their bodies do.

In Gethsemane, anticipating his tortuous death on the cross, Jesus endured an all-encompassing suffering: his sweat became like drops of blood as he cried out, “I am deeply grieved, even to death” (Mk 14:34). Once pain has reached a certain threshold, it expands beyond the site of its origin, causing an avalanche of biochemical reactions that affect the circulation, muscles, tissues, and organs of the body—as anyone who suffers the excruciating pain of a migraine headache can affirm.

Suffering from headaches seems to be a problem that has existed since the dawn of humanity. Eight thousand years ago, Sumerian pharmacists offered relief from headaches with the medicine of pulverized bark of a willow tree. In medieval times, medicinal blood-sucking leeches were applied to the forehead. In the mid-sixteenth century, if a court official of Russian Tsar Ivan the Terrible complained of a headache, the tsar would order nails to be driven into his head. Although this cure sounds more like a diabolical punishment, nails have been used since primitive times to release the demons believed to reside inside aching heads. Heave a sigh of gratitude that today we are spared such primitive medical treatments.

For his soul-body suffering, Jesus seeks relief not from nails, leeches, or crushed willow bark, but in the conviction that if he endured suffering like the dying grain of wheat, he would produce the kind of fruit that glorifies God. The Sufi mystic Rumi, quoted last Thursday, says of suffering: “Your defects are the ways that glory is manifested. Don’t turn your head. Keep looking at the bandaged place. That is where the light enters you.” Find relief from your pain in this wisdom that your wounds of heart and body are portholes through which the splendorous Light enters you. Keep in mind that your wounds and defects may very well be manifestations of the glory of God.





HOLY "EGG" SATURDAY

Easter Eve

Today, also known as "Tomb Saturday," is observed as a solemn vigil at the tomb of Jesus, yet it is also a day of joyful preparation. Holy Saturday is busy with the preparation of festive foods, the dyeing of Easter eggs, and the cleaning and decorating of our homes in preparation for the great feast of Easter. After sunset tonight, the Easter Vigil is celebrated, during which the catechumens, after their long period of preparation, are initiated into the church through the sacraments of baptism, confirmation, and eucharist. They are born anew as Easter people.

Eggs are primary symbols of Easter, for they are nature's tomb-wombs, where behind the thinnest of membrane walls new life awaits birth. Eggs have also long been connected with Easter because in former times, along with meat, they were forbidden foods during Lent and so became special Easter treats. Today, Easter eggs are usually used primarily for decoration. Yet in pre-Christian antiquity, eggs were "good medicine." Since life slumbered within them, they were often used in mystic healing and fertility rites. Among the ancient holy stories of creation is one that tells about the earth being

hatched from a giant cosmic egg; other myths likewise speak of the first living person being hatched from an egg.

The Egyptians buried their dead with eggs, both as nourishment during their process of rebirth and as medicinal food for life after death. Archaeological excavations of ancient burial sites have found clay eggs interred with the deceased as protective burial amulets. These discoveries lead us to wonder whether Nicodemus, when burying Jesus with costly spices, also left an egg in his tomb.

Today's cholesterol-consciousness has placed a warning label on eggs that says, "Handle with Care." Just as valid, however, would be a label that says, "Handle with Reverence," for eggs have long been considered sacramentals, or signs of the holy. Symbols of Easter joy, eggs have been colored with vegetable dyes or painted in various colors for centuries and used as festive decorations. Among the Slavic peoples they have been adorned with gold and silver. Family and friends exchanged decorated eggs as Easter gifts, and more elaborately embellished eggs were often saved as family heirlooms. One German custom called for the piercing and emptying of eggs. The hollow eggshells were then brightly painted and hung as Easter decorations on trees and shrubs. In other countries, it was the custom to bury a blessed egg just outside the wall of one's home to ward off disease, misfortune, and lightning. Perhaps these age-old customs should be resurrected; certainly the sacramental status of eggs should be revived.

An egg is an excellent icon for prayer. On this Holy Saturday, use an egg to reflect on the experience of being entombed, as was the body of Jesus. Prayerfully meditate on the image of yourself as dead and buried. While occasionally we may think of our own death, few of us ever picture ourselves entombed, for such a suffocating thought is too

dreadful to consider. Today, let your icon egg heal you of the fear of being buried as you contemplate it with trust in Jesus' promise that you will be raised up with him. Realize that the walls of your future tomb are made of the thinnest of membranes, just like the delicate shell of your egg. Then, raise your icon egg to your ear and listen. In the silence, hear the infallible triumphant shout, "Alleluia! Christ is Risen—and you with him!"

