

Homily preached by the Reverend Peter M. J. Stravinskas, Ph.D., S.T.D., for Ash Wednesday (14 February 2018) at the Church of the Holy Innocents, New York City.

Anyone who has dealt with little children will say that the most annoying part of being in their presence is their incessant asking of questions. Five minutes out of the driveway for a cross-country trip gets the query: “Are we there yet?” And, of course, there is the equally incessant question word, “Why?” – often ending up after five attempts to offer a rational response, with the parent’s irrational appeal to authority, “Because I said so!” As a professor of educational psychology for years, however, I have always reminded teachers and parents alike that a child’s asking of questions is a sign of life and intelligence, which needs to be encouraged and not avoided.

Indeed, Socrates has gone down in history precisely as the asker of questions, often enough inconvenient questions, causing him to label himself a “gadfly.” For that reason, good courses in teacher education present Socrates as a model educator and his approach as “the Socratic method.” St. John Paul II set the tone for his 1980 pastoral visit to France by asking the grossly inconvenient question, “France, eldest daughter of the Church, what have you done with your baptism?”

As you undoubtedly know, the holy season of Lent had its origins in the need for a proximate preparation of catechumens for their baptism at the liturgy of the Easter Vigil. With the passage of time and the waning of adult baptisms in subsequent generations due to the Christianization of Europe, the catechumenal nature of Lent passed into a time of intense self-introspection, bringing “cradle Catholics” to hear anew the inaugural challenge of Jesus, “Repent, and believe in the Gospel” (Mk 1:15) – one of the two formulas for the imposition of the ashes. Now, self-introspection ought not to be confused with the very unhelpful process of narcissistic navel gazing, a process that begins with me and ends with me. We have heard *ad nauseam* in this pontificate of the centrality of “discernment.” Make no mistake about it: Discernment is critically important, but it’s not the discernment that has one say to his physician during the annual exam, “Now, Doc, please do n’t give me any bad news.” Even secular wisdom reminds us that “the man who is his own lawyer has a fool for a client.” No, Lent demands something much more demanding and thus much more helpful. And that is having open ears and an open heart to receive the questions which Almighty God poses to us.

Starting today and continuing for the Tuesdays of Lent, I shall be offering a sermon series to accompany our Lenten lectures on the psalms with reflections on what I like to call “divine questions” in Sacred Scripture.

Since all human sin has its origins in that “original” sin of our first parents, let’s go back to that very beginning. In truth, the traditional formula for the imposition ashes presents the holy command, *Memento, homo, quia pulvis es et in pulverem reverteris* (Remember, man, that thou art dust and unto dust thou shalt return). As unappealing as that reminder is to modern arrogance, yes, we must recall that we do come from dust and shall return to the same.

And so, this evening, let’s begin by hearing three questions directed by the Creator to Adam and Eve. We should observe that posing questions – particularly rhetorical questions – suggests a deep respect for the dignity of the other. When those questions are raised by Almighty God, the Source of truth, and especially in the fullness of time by His beloved Son, Truth Incarnate, we know that we are on the royal road to genuine self-discovery.

At the very dawn of time, we find three leading questions: To Adam, “Where are you?” (Gen 3:9); to the pair, “Who told you that you were naked?” (Gen 3:11); to Eve, “What is this that you have done?” (Gen 3:13). Those same queries are directed to us today. How shall we respond?

Where are you? “I hid,” admits Adam. As soon as the deed is done, the primordial couple hide from God. They experience shame and guilt. We could use a healthy dose of both in our “non-judgmental” society – non-judgmental, that is, unless you fail to worship one of their sacred cows. Shame is the recognition that one has done something beneath one’s dignity; guilt is the realization that one has done something wrong. As we see in this passage from Genesis, sin is not a modern invention; it is as old as our race. What is new is how all too many people are proud to parade their perversions for all to behold. Jerry Springer, Judge Judy and Dr. Phil would all go out of business if folks had the decency at least to be embarrassed by their misdeeds. Ironically, these are also often enough the same individuals who declare, “I would never tell my sins to any priest!” No, only to an audience of ten or twenty million.

Guilt is an ambivalent reaction. There is good guilt and bad guilt. Peter and Judas both sinned against their Master; both experienced guilt. Peter’s guilt led him on to repentance as he caught the converting look of Jesus, causing him to weep and return (cf. Mt 26:75); that scene is beautifully depicted on one of the panels of the Holy Door of St. Peter’s Basilica. Judas’ guilt, on the other hand, had him turn in on himself, causing him to commit suicide.

To be fair to Adam, his decision to hide from his Creator was a kind of holy instinct. The Prince of the Apostles centuries later would react similarly: “Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man” (Lk 5:8). A sincere sinner (and therefore, one already on his way to repentance) is convicted of his waywardness by contact with the holy. As a matter of fact, not infrequently the Devil uses that intuition to convince us that our sins are too great ever to be forgiven as he tempts us to stay away from Holy Mass and, most especially, from the Sacrament of Penance.

Lent is the time to ask ourselves a few key questions: Where am I in my walk with the Lord? Where do I want to be? Where should I be? If an honest look in the mirror tells you that you have a long way to go yet (and it should), resolve to do what is necessary. An adage teaches us: “The road to Hell is paved with good intentions.” So much time is lost and grace wasted by a lifestyle of “woulda, coulda, shoulda.” No, St. Thérèse of Lisieux admonishes us: “Begin now . . . Believe me. . . Don’t wait until tomorrow to begin becoming a saint.” Hence, the Church launches this holy season by echoing St. Paul’s clarion call: “Behold, *now* is the acceptable time; behold, *now* is the day of salvation” (2 Cor 6:2).

What have you done? The Lord God now asks a most uncomfortable question – and before Him, no fancy footwork is possible. It is essential and a sign of psychological and spiritual maturity to take responsibility for one’s actions. Did you catch the game of blame-shifting in Genesis? Adam blames Eve; Eve blames the serpent. Adam’s lack of manliness is more than fear or weakness. By blaming Eve – “the woman you gave me” – he is actually blaming God for the whole mess. Once more, we find vast numbers of true descendants of Adam among us today: “Really, Lord, it’s not my fault. You made me this way.” Or, “Everyone knows living a Gospel life is well-nigh impossible. A noble ideal but practically unachievable.” On the contrary, St. Paul – based on long personal experience – asserts unequivocally: “I can do all things in him who strengthens me” (Ph 4:13).

So, what do I have to do to undo the damage I have done to the relationship of grace I had on

the day of my baptism? First of all, make an honest self-assessment. Did any of you watch the liturgy for Otto von Hapsburg in 2011? Particularly moving was the dialogue of the so-called “Knocking Ceremony” between the prior of the Capuchin community and the master of ceremonies:

(The MC knocks thrice)

Prior: Who desires entry?

MC: Otto of Austria; once Crown Prince of Austria-Hungary; Royal Prince of Hungary and Bohemia, of Dalmatia, Croatia, Slavonia, Galicia, Lodomeria and Illyria; Grand Duke of Tuscany and Cracow; Duke of Lorraine, Salzburg, Styria, Carinthia, Carniola and the Bukowina; Grand Prince of Transylvania, Margrave of Moravia; Duke of Upper and Lower Silesia, of Modena, Parma, Piacenza, Guastalla, of Oświęcim and Zator, Teschen, Friaul, Dubrovnik and Zadar; Princely Count of Habsburg and Tyrol, of Kyburg, Gorizia and Gradisca; Prince of Trent and Brixen; Margrave of Upper and Lower Lusatia and Istria; Count of Hohenems, Feldkirch, Bregenz, Sonnenburg etc.; Lord of Trieste, Kotor and Windic March, Grand Voivod of the Voivodeship of Serbia, etc., etc.

Prior: We do not know him.

(The MC knocks thrice)

Prior: Who desires entry?

MC: Dr. Otto von Habsburg, President and Honorary President of the Paneuropean Union, Member and quondam President of the European Parliament, honorary doctor of many universities, honorary citizen of many cities in Central Europe, member of numerous venerable academies and institutes, recipient of high civil and ecclesiastical honours, awards, and medals, which were given him in recognition of his decades-long struggle for the freedom of peoples for justice and right.

Prior: We do not know him.

(The MC knocks thrice)

Prior: Who desires entry?

MC: Otto, a mortal and sinful man.

Prior: Then let him come in.

It was just such honesty which brought the adulterous, murderous King David from his sinful state to sanctity: “For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done that which is evil in thy sight, so that thou art justified in thy sentence and blameless in thy judgment” (Ps 51:3-4).

Once a desire for honesty has been exhibited, then a sincere examination of conscience can occur. Yes, have recourse to the Ten Commandments as a guide but also, even better, size yourself up according to the catalog of human and Christian virtues: the theological virtues which were God’s gifts to us in baptism – faith, hope, charity; the moral virtues – prudence, justice, temperance, fortitude; and that whole impressive list of attitudes and behaviors which St. Paul calls the “fruit of the Holy Spirit” in his Epistle to the Galatians (5:22) – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness,

self-control. It is also good to turn one's attention not simply to overtly sinful actions but also to good actions left undone. A very healthy addition to the traditional *Confiteor* of the Mass was "and in what I have failed to do." Now one is ready to approach the tribunal of mercy, which is the Sacrament of Penance, which ought to be an integral part of one's Catholic practice.

Who told you that you were naked? Notice that our first parents discover their nakedness only after their sin, which brings them a strange form of "enlightenment." They wanted to be like God – not a bad thing in itself; the problem was that they wanted to be like God in His power, not in His love. They had everything, didn't know it, and were ungrateful for it all.

We have two equally malevolent temptations as humans: being perpetual malcontents or being slavishly complacent. The first manifests itself in lines like, "Yeah, ok, thanks for what you did for me yesterday but what are you going to do tomorrow?" The second comes out in a cynical cry: "Why bother? Nothing ever changes." Malcontentment is often expressed by former Catholics, who declare: "I left the Catholic Church because I wasn't being fed." Were they really "not being fed"? Or, did they just not like the menu?

"Who told you that you were naked?" comes from the ultimate source of truth. However, whence do many Catholics receive their information? Whence their ideas of truth and proper standards of human behavior? Academia? Hollywood? The media? Catholics in the United States, from time immemorial, have suffered from an inferiority complex, always wishing to blend in, to assimilate, like the little puppy dog with his snout against the window, desperately hoping to get to the other side. In 1977, Billy Joel in his "Only the Good Die Young" capitalized on that sad trait of ours when he taunted: "Come out, Virginia, don't let 'em wait; you Catholic girls start much too late!" Ridicule is a powerful instrument to change behavior, in this case, to move girls from virginity to promiscuity – and we have seen the results of that move.

Well, if we don't take our cues from a rudderless academia or an amoral Hollywood or an envelope-pushing media, then from whom? Our guide is our well-informed and well-formed Catholic conscience. Note well: "conscience" is not a synonym for "personal opinion." A Catholic conscience is rooted in the infallible Word of God as that is faithfully transmitted from generation to generation through the Church's Magisterium. That Magisterium, the Vatican II Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, teaches us "is not above the Word of God but serves it" (n. 4). And so, no priest, bishop, cardinal or pope can alter its content one iota. As St. Paul declaimed: "But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we preached to you, let him be accursed" (Gal 1:8). A conscience thus formed and informed is precisely the kind of conscience that the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council praised in *Gaudium et Spes*:

In the depths of his conscience, man detects a law which he does not impose upon himself, but which holds him to obedience. Always summoning him to love good and avoid evil, the voice of conscience when necessary speaks to his heart: do this, shun that. For man has in his heart a law written by God; to obey it is the very dignity of man; according to it he will be judged. Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of a man. There he is alone with God, Whose voice echoes in his depths. In a wonderful manner conscience reveals that law which is fulfilled by love of God and neighbor. (n. 16)

That's who tells us who we really are and whom we need to be. How unlike the shallow and embarrassing treatment of conscience by an American prelate speaking in England last week!

Opening Lent with reflection on questions raised in the Book of Genesis validates the insight of T.S. Eliot: "In my beginning is my end." Taking to heart serious questions presented by one whom I know as my loving God will ensure a truly fruitful Lent.