

START OF LENT. 2026

There are different ways to describe Lent, but my favorite is to call it the Season of the Confiteor. We pray the Confiteor at the start of Holy Mass on most Sundays. In the Confiteor, we acknowledge that we have sinned “through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault.”

We find ourselves in messes fairly often. Almost none of these messes are entirely our fault. Most often, however, we concentrate more on somebody else’s contribution to the mess than on our own. During Lent, we shift focus. We are not authorized to hand anyone a certificate of absolution. We don’t tell the other people involved in our messes that it isn’t their fault at all. During Lent, however, we focus on the degree to which problems have happened “through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault.”

To some, that sounds impractical. On the contrary, what really ruins personal lives, families, communities, churches, nations, and the world, is the refusal to do that. As long as we say to our past and future opponents, “through your fault, through your fault, through your most grievous fault,” we guarantee future fights.

Recently, I encountered someone I remembered as a bright kid in his mid-teens. Now he teaches high school history in a certain Wyoming town. We talked about his favorite historical topic, World War I. Now, at the end of World War I, the winners got together and agreed to force defeated Germany to sign a statement declaring that the whole wretched mess had been “Germany’s fault, Germany’s fault, Germany’s most grievous fault.” By implication, the winners declared to the world that they had been oozing virtue from every available pore the whole time. Still oozing virtue, they demanded that guilty Germany pay reparations for the next several decades. I suppose that in the post war mood, this seemed to make sense, but genuinely wise men would have known better. It came alarmingly close to the winners of a big, complicated bar fight going through the loser’s pockets for cash. More importantly, by putting all the blame for the complicated mess on Germany, declaring their own righteousness, and then demanding compensation for their righteous efforts, the winners helped create a dangerous level of bitterness in Germany. If the allies said it was all Germany’s fault, and that Germany had to pay, the Germans, with equal folly, answered back that it was all the allies’ fault, and that someday they were going to pay. The rest, as they say, is history, and dark, nasty history. A bigger and more horrid war would rise from all those bitter ashes, like an evil phoenix. The wisdom of reconciliation was the only way to genuine peace, the wisdom that doesn’t pretend that the other side doesn’t bear a lot of guilt, but that admits that our own side bore some of the guilt also. In part, the tragic mess happened “through our fault, through our fault, through our most grievous fault.”

I have known several people who have been genuinely hurt by others. Some of them became good men and women despite that hurt, and some of them became truly unpleasant people, unhappy, and seemingly resolved to help everyone else be unhappy. Some people who got badly hurt sank into nastiness, acting as though, because someone hurt them badly, they received a life long license to be mean. They made a fist and shouted that they wanted “justice”, all the while really being interested in revenge. They never got enough revenge to make them happy. No one ever does. Other people who got badly hurt rose into wisdom. They didn’t blame themselves for what happened, but they did admit that they had not been faultless

themselves. Without denying their hurt, they began to help other people heal from their own hurts. They opened their hands to practice mercy and charity. Rejecting revenge and getting on with the vital business of living a good life, they escaped their own past and became a blessing in other people's present. They wandered into happiness.

Worldly wisdom says that we need "justice," by which is usually meant some measure of vengeance, so that the people who hurt us suffer as much as we suffered. From this comes the grim practice of score keeping. Who is ahead in the misery count? Surely "justice" is not served until we are close to equally miserable! No attitude is more certain to wreck an individual life, a family, a community, a state, a nation, or a world.

True justice certainly requires that someone ceases to inflict harm. Once that has been accomplished, however, beware of the attitude of "Make Them Pay for What They've Done!" Sometimes, some punishment is required and some reparation is necessary; but our attitude in seeking such things, to the degree that we may have such a right, needs to be the humble attitude that recognizes that what other parties did happened in a context, and, in context, what happened is almost never entirely their fault. They, like we ourselves, are entangled in circumstances largely beyond our control. Of course, sometimes people do truly hurt us. Often, though not always, when people hurt us, we have made some contribution of our own to the mess. I was only once in a serious, no holds barred fight in college - a deeply alarming and unpleasant experience I do not recommend. My opponent hurt me, and I hurt him. As far as I recall, he was the first to get kinetic, tackling me to the ground. Part of the context, however, is that I was being pretty annoying. That didn't justify him starting a serious fight, but it did mean that he didn't start the thing out of abstract meanness. I really annoyed him. It was by no means all my fault, but the embarrassing spectacle happened in part "through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault."

Inspired by God's Grace, we can admit that we are partly responsible for the messes in us and around us. God's Grace will keep us from the inverted pride of claiming full responsibility for those messes, but it will help us achieve the genuine humility of accepting partial responsibility. That is the first step of Lent. Once God's Grace has helped us take that first step, God's Grace will begin to work even more powerfully in us. If we cooperate, we can, perhaps surprisingly, become good Christian men and women. The great Franco-German evangelist St. Ansgar (a man of the 9th Century, when France and Germany were just beginning to become distinct from each other), missionary to the Danes and Swedes, was sometimes the instrument through whom God worked miracles to open Viking ears and hearts to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. After one such miracle, St. Ansgar's disciple and biographer Rembert recounts that he gushed to St. Ansgar that he had never before seen anything so glorious. Ansgar answered, "The greatest miracle God can do for me is to make me a good man." God's Grace can do that miracle for all of us.

The miracle of us becoming good men and women is actually a series of miracles, all worked by the Grace of God through Jesus Christ. The first of this sequence of miracles is our being willing and able to say, "through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault." This miracle opens to us the door to genuine holiness, and to our families, our community, our nation, our Church, and our world, the door to genuine peace.

Let it be so! Amen.

