

Lecturer Reflection #7: March 4, 2025

Here at last we shall be free, the Almighty hath not built
Here for his envy, will not drive us hence:
Here we may reign secure; and in my choice,
To reign is worth ambition, though in Hell:
Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven.

--Proclamation of Satan, Book I, Paradise Lost, John Milton, 1674

During the February or March CCD (now PSR) classes of my youth in the mid-1960's (I did attend a Catholic high school), the lay instructors inevitably urged students to give up something for Lent. The teachers, being well-meaning but not expertly trained in either pre-Vatican II or post-Vatican II theology, did not link this small sacrifice to a larger goal; giving up something for Lent was inadequately presented as an end in itself. Perceiving no reason to jettison something for no apparent purpose, I annually ignored the CCD teachers and never gave up anything for Lent.

It was not until Lent 1983 that a priest explained to me the reason for sacrificing something during Lent. The priest, incredulous that I did not understand the rationale for giving up something during Lent, finally explained that renouncing a thing or item during Lent has no intrinsic value unless tied to a more comprehensive effort towards reformation and conversion of heart. Although this explanation made sense, and although Shakespeare once wrote that "it is by indirection that we find directions out," I have rarely been one to pursue indirectly that which may be pursued directly. Since moral reformation and conversion is the heart of the matter during Lent, I view it as better to pursue becoming a better person directly rather than through indirection.

The direct question, therefore, in this month's reflection is: "how do I become a better person during Lent?" Perhaps examining the statement by Milton's Satan provides a clue. Satan's proclamation that it is "better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven" exemplifies the worst of the seven deadly sins: Pride, which is literally the original (in the sense of first) sin. Rather than serve God the Father, as did Jesus when he taught, suffered and died on Earth for our benefit, Satan is consumed by the desire to rule and to dominate for his own selfish purposes. The temptation to power is his downfall; Satan cannot abide the truth that there exists a Being who created him and who is greater than he. Satan cannot worship and love the God who created him.

According to the Book of Genesis, Adam and Eve committed a similar sin of pride. They succumbed to the temptation to eat the fruit of the forbidden tree based on the tempter's assurance that they would become gods themselves. Permit me to suggest that the sins which we habitually commit, and which prevent us from becoming better people, are likewise rooted in pride.

We human beings may habitually commit different types of sins, but our experience is that every human being has one or more consistent weaknesses. Since we commit these sins repeatedly, we almost become comfortable with them. We may even come to regard them as no impediment whatsoever in our relationship with God. As Milton's Satan would say it, we "reign secure" in these sins. Worse, we delude ourselves, like Satan, into thinking that our sins make us "free." Consider, for a moment, all of the sins (many in violation of the Second, Sixth, Ninth and Tenth Commandments) that movies and modern advertising attempt to convince us will make us "free." But as our Church has constantly reminded humanity for 2,000 years, the supposed "freedom" generated by sin actually results in the opposite. Rather than becoming empowered by sinful conduct, we become enslaved by our appetites and weaknesses. Satan's "security" of habitual sins is the security of a jail cell. Sin is confinement, not freedom. And Satan, having mortally sinned without remorse, is indeed eternally confined, not free, in a terrible place because God is not there.

How do we escape our habitual sins that imprison us? How do we initiate that reformation and conversion of heart to which Lent calls us? As those who participate in 12-step programs insist, the first step towards conversion is to admit that we have a problem. And that, fellow Knights, is where Pride may prevent reform. For just as Satan refused to acknowledge God as a superior loving Being, so also we refuse to admit that our habitual sins, in fact, are moral problems that are an impediment to our relationship with God. Our own culpable Pride prevents us from acknowledging the injury we do to ourselves and others through our habitual sins. Rather than act as the tax collector who knelt in the rear of the synagogue beating his breast and saying, "Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner," we sometimes act like the publican who stood at the front of the synagogue proclaiming to the Lord how wonderful he was.

In short, if we as Knights wish to become better persons during this season of Lent, the first step is to recognize in ourselves, and then to cast off, the Pride that prevents us from admitting to God how sinful we are and specifically identifying those sins. Rather than "reigning secure" in our habitual sins, all of us must admit our faults, resolve to amend them and serve God in Heaven better. For it is, indeed, better to serve in Heaven than to rule in Hell.

Worthy Grand Knight, I yield back.