

PASTORAL LETTER OF BISHOP KIERAN CONRY

Lent 2009

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

The following story was told by a Jesuit, so it must be true. It was told about a couple in the Czech Republic, I think, but that's not important. The couple had been married for some years, and like many marriages, the relationship had grown a little tired and dull. Both felt this way, but neither had admitted it. But then, independently, they both began searching the internet for new and fresh relationships. Within time, each had found a contact, invented a new name for themselves and exchanged details; they talked about what they wanted from a relationship, how they needed excitement, someone to talk to, and described how they were interesting individuals, easy to talk to, good company and eager to live life.

In time, the two pairs of people who had met on the internet were ready to meet, and, as it happened, they had arranged the same day. Neither one of the couple knew what the other was doing.

The husband had arranged to meet his new friend at the station. By coincidence, so had the wife. As the husband and wife looked round the station for the start of this new life, they saw one another and suddenly realised what had happened. If you haven't guessed by now, they had been talking to one another on the internet. He didn't tell us what happened to the relationship. We can only hope that it was re-kindled.

Our own relationships can suffer that tiredness, when we stop talking to one another, when we begin not to notice how interesting the other person is, when we forget all that we have in common, or just give in to tiredness. And our relationship with God is no different.

Lent is a time traditionally given over to a penitential time of preparation for Easter. I'm sure that it is used most fruitfully by those who are preparing to be received into the Church or into full communion at Easter. For them this is the heady excitement of courtship, dating, getting to know God in a new and thrilling way. Could many of us say that our relationship with God is thrilling or exciting?

What happened with the couple in the story is that, as they had to invent this new persona for the internet, they had to look at themselves again, at what they really were and what they really wanted. Lent is a time for that. It is a time to look at ourselves, at what we really are, and what we really want.

It is easy for this to remain quite abstract unless we give it some 'flesh'. One way I suggest we might give it flesh is to consider seriously the idea of the Sacrament of Reconciliation during Lent. The Sacrament, which is still usually called 'confession', is one part of the Church's practice that has seen perhaps the greatest decline. But why?

There was a debate recently in the letters to the Catholic press, sparked by comments from someone in the Vatican who suggested that we have lost our sense of sin. I have suggested for a long time that it might be a mistake to say that we ever really had one. We had a sense of

wrong-doing, knew what the rules were and when we broke them. But was that a profound sense of sin?

And I suspect that this is connected with the decline in the practice of confession. I think that for many people, the whole process is simply too mechanical; you list some of your most common failings to a priest, he gives you a fairly simple penance, you say a prayer expressing sorrow and then you're forgiven. But do you really feel forgiven? Do you really feel that you have re-discovered your relationship with God? Do you feel that you have arrived at a point of genuine renewal of your life? You may do. That would be good.

But suppose that instead of the list of sins you have been reciting as a child, you bring to the priest what is really weighing on you? Instead of saying that you swore and have been angry, instead of saying that you have had bad thoughts and were distracted when you prayed, you stepped back and looked at your life today? Suppose you looked at what had made the spark go out of your relationship with God? What is really making you tired? Where do you want to find faith again, and what happened to it?

Go to the priest and talk about these things, the way in which your relationship with God might have grown stale. Because sin is ultimately something that damages our relationship with God. It is not just breaking the rules. That couple needed the internet to focus their needs and their image of themselves. The sacrament of reconciliation might provide the same means of focus. What am I really like? What do I really want for myself and those I love? And what is holding me back from all of that? What is getting in the way of God?

There are forty days of Lent. There is time to think, to prepare and to make time for this precious opportunity to refresh our relationship with God, the one we call our Father.

I hope that Lent is a fruitful time of genuine renewal for you all.