

The Lenten Prayer of St. Ephrem the Syrian

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Of all Lenten hymns and prayers, one short prayer can be termed the *Lenten prayer*. Tradition ascribes it to one of the great teachers of spiritual life—St. Ephrem the Syrian. Here is its text:

**O Lord and Master of my life!
Take from me the spirit of sloth,
faint-heartedness, lust of power,
and idle talk. But give rather the
spirit of chastity, humility,
patience, and love to thy servant.
Yea, O Lord and King! Grant
me to see my own errors and not
to judge my brother; for thou art
blessed unto ages of ages. Amen.**

This prayer is read twice at the end of each Lenten service Monday through Friday (not on Saturdays and Sundays for, as we shall see later, the services of these days do not follow the Lenten pattern). At the first reading, a prostration follows each petition. Then we all bow twelve times saying: "O God, cleanse me a sinner." The entire prayer is repeated with one final prostration at the end.

Why does this short and simple prayer occupy such an important position in the entire Lenten worship? Because it enumerates in a unique way all the "negative" and "positive" elements of repentance and constitutes, so to speak, a "check list" for our individual Lenten effort. This effort is aimed first at our liberation from some fundamental spiritual diseases which shape our

life and make it virtually impossible for us even to start turning ourselves to God.

The basic disease is *sloth*. It is that strange laziness and passivity of our entire being which always pushes us "down" rather than "up"—which constantly convinces us that no change is possible and therefore desirable. It is in fact a deeply rooted cynicism which to every spiritual challenge responds "what for?" and makes our life one tremendous spiritual waste. It is the root of all sin because it poisons the spiritual energy at its very source.

The result of sloth is *faint-heartedness*. It is the state of despondency which all spiritual Fathers consider the greatest danger for the soul. Despondency is the impossibility for man to see anything good or positive; it is the reduction of everything to negativism and pessimism. It is truly a demonic power in us because the Devil is fundamentally a liar. He lies to man about God and about the world; he fills life with darkness and negation. Despondency is the suicide of the soul because when man is possessed by it he is absolutely unable to see the light and to desire it.

Lust of power! Strange as it may seem, it is precisely sloth and despondency that fill our life with lust of power. By vitiating the entire attitude toward life and making it meaningless and empty, they force us to seek compensation in, a radically wrong attitude toward other persons. If my life is not oriented toward God, not aimed at eternal