

# OUR DUTY DURING LENT<sup>1</sup>

Beginning of Lent, 1976  
(Second part)

**P**ERMIT ME to illustrate my appeal in this instance. Suppose you see a little child unaware of the dangers of standing on a railroad while a train is approaching at high speed. You have a short chance of saving his life, would you leave him? Suppose you say, “What have I to do with the lives of children? I am a monk seeking my own salvation.” You thus refrain from running to save his life. Would you then be able to save yourself? What would you be in the eyes of the world or of the child’s mother? This is a terrible question!

If such is the case regarding indifference to saving a child from under a train, how much more would negligence in saving a person from eternal damnation be? Is negligence in saving a whole church with its priests and ministers from the spirit of indifference regarding the salvation of people bordering on hell less dreadful than slackness in saving a child from under a train? Further, is laxness in saving the spirits of young men and women who perish in millions all over the world less dreadful than slackness in saving a child from under a train? Is it not a great sin not to feel sorry for the perdition of sinners without even caring to suffer for them? Further, is it not this particular sin that has brought the action of the Holy Spirit in the Church to a halt?

I dare even say that it is this particular sin that has pushed us into the dark and caused us to lose track of our own way, not knowing where we go, for the darkness of indifference has encompassed us on every side. How can we say that we live in the light or walk in the light while we actually do not love our neighbor (cf 1John 2:10) but, on the contrary, hate him even to death since we have left him to perish without even bending to save his life? We actually lie and do not tell the truth if we say, after all, that we love God or our neighbor.

It is true that we ought to save ourselves. However, is it acceptable that our brother should perish while we are able to save him, along with millions of other people, through prayer?

You might say, “I am a monk, am I responsible for whom I do not bear

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew the Poor, *Sojourners* (Wadi al-Natrun, Egypt: St Macarius Press, 2019): 46-51. This letter is taken from the Arabic book *Rasā'il al-Qummuṣ Mattā al-Miskīn* (Monastery of Saint Macarius, Wādī al-Natrūn 2007) and corresponds to letter 52, *al-Ni'ma wa-l-Kalima wa-l-Sirr* (Grace, Word and Mystery, 185-193).

responsibility?” This is just like saying, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” (Gen 4:9). The claim that the responsibility for saving sinners lies on the priests and bishops who have made themselves pastors over them is answered by the Lord through the prophet Isaiah, who places us in a position of paramount responsibility:

I have set watchmen on your walls, O Jerusalem; they shall never hold their peace day or night. You who make mention of the Lord, do not keep silent, and give Him no rest till He establishes and until He makes Jerusalem [the Church] a praise in the earth (Isa 62:6-7).

You might say, “Who am I to guard the whole Church and the world?” What use is my prayer to millions while I am a sinner? Such work is beyond the ability of mankind. “Is it not the work of heaven?”

In answer to this, the Bible adduces the example of Elijah, who “was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain; and it did not rain on the land for three years and six months” (Jas 5:17). Does heaven then listen and respond to our pleas concerning rain, which has to do with the nourishment of plants and animals, but fail to listen or respond to our pleas concerning our salvation and our eternal life? Do not the Scriptures say that the spirit of Elijah goes before the Lord to prepare a way for Him (cf Lk 1:17)? Has that way come to an end? Are you not the Elijahs of this age? Is prayer a matter of risk? Is it not for the Father’s glory?

On the other hand, God secures the response to prayer and verifies it with a personal guarantee to perform a miracle and open the heavens:

Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me will do the works that I do, and greater works than these he will do, because I go to My Father. And whatever you ask in My name, that I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask anything in My name, I will do it (Jn 14:12–14).

Here it becomes clear to us that the case of prayer and its response is confined within the strictest limits; Christ’s only stipulation is “he who believes in Me” (Jn 14:12).

Therefore, the perdition of sinners defies our faith, and the devil also defies our faith. The whole world’s present ordeal is caused by our lack of faith. The deep slumber of today’s church and the feebleness of its clergy are but the work of our own flimsy faith!

What then? Shall we hold our peace against such defiance? Shall we bear the responsibility for the condemnation of those who perish? St. Paul calls upon you: “Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith.” Test yourselves. “Do you not know yourselves that Jesus Christ is in you?” (2 Cor 13:5).

Is it not currently high time that we wrestle with God in prayer till dawn or even till death? Only then will our faith be vindicated and our prayers answered. Only then will the miracle take place and heaven open its gates. Only then will God send power from

on high to stir up the whole church and fulfill the desired salvation with strength and fervor. Everyone would then confess, repent, and accept God's gift that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord.

Why have we lost the spirit of our fathers and our prophets? They stirred up heaven and the very heart of God himself. Is it difficult for us to do what Daniel did?

Then I set my face toward the Lord God to make a request by prayer and supplication, with fasting, sackcloth, and ashes. And I prayed to the Lord, my God, and made confession... Now while I was speaking, praying, confessing my sin and the sin of my people Israel, and presenting my supplication before the Lord my God for the holy mountain of my God, yes, while I was speaking in prayer, the man Gabriel... reached me. and he informed me, talked with me, and said, "O Daniel, I have now come forth to give you skill to understand. At the beginning of your supplications the command went out, and I have come to tell you, for you are greatly beloved" (Dan 9:3, 20-23).

God immediately responded to Daniel's petition. Or, is it difficult for us to do what Nehemiah did:

So it was, when I heard these words that I sat down and wept, and mourned for many days; I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven. O Lord, I pray, please let Your ear be attentive to the prayer of Your servant and to the prayer of Your servants who desire to fear Your name; and let Your servant prosper this day (Neh 1:4, 11).

We know that God effectively responded to Nehemiah and prospered all of his efforts to renew Jerusalem. Now, are we, with all the treasures of grace, the efficacy of the divine blood, the glory of the Cross, the triumph of the Resurrection and the gifts of the day of Pentecost, inferior to the Old Testament prophets?

Again, I would like to remind you, dear brethren, that the fault and blame do not lie in the slumbering Church, the degenerate youth, or the immoral world, but in ourselves—we whom God has set as guards of prayer over the walls of Jerusalem to guard the church in our nocturnal and daily watches. We have concerned ourselves with what belongs to us, and so our prayer has rebounded to our own bosom.

However, thanks be to God, who still persists in calling us to watch, sending out His voice at the beginning of the Great Lent, the season of prayer and weeping, the time for mourning and repentance, for sackcloth and sitting in the dust like the days of old. On her part, the Church continues to resound her plaintive tunes, reminding us of the victims who have forsaken her bosom never to return again, and awakening in us a sense of guilt, so that we may perchance wake up and recover our godly zeal to restore those who are still within her reach.

(1976)

