

***Franciscan University Presents***  
***“Dying to Self”***  
***With guest, Dr. Ian Murphy***

**Dying to Self: A Fresh Look at Lent**  
**By Dr. Ian Murphy**

My favorite treasure would have to be my grandmother’s Bible, which I inherited when she died. Nanie had planned to bequeath it to me ever since I was in kindergarten. She then spent the next twenty years writing me private notes in the margins, so that after she died, I could still experience her communication in a palpable way—until our eventual reunion in the world to come. I struggle to find words that could adequately express how grateful I am to still have my Nanie’s wisdom with me in this priceless way.

Nanie was a convert to Catholicism out of a past in witchcraft. She came to Christianity through a dramatic conversion and brought her tattoos, sarcasm, and sharp wit along with her. She was a snarky spitfire who called it like she saw it, and she had one of the biggest hearts I’ve ever known. Through her priceless heirloom, two decades of her growth in Christ are recorded in the margins of the most marked-up Bible I’ve ever seen. And when Saint James tells us to “consider it pure joy whenever you face trials of many kinds” (James 1:2) Nanie responds to him in all capital letters, “YEAH SURE.” Nanie seemed to prefer the Book of Hebrews’ approach to the matter. Where it states that “no discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful” (Hebrews 12:11), Nanie writes, “No kidding!!” She’s onto something. We don’t like to suffer.

Like my Nanie, I’m also a convert to Catholicism, thanks especially to how the Lord used my mentor Dr. Tony Martin. Dr. Martin is among the brightest men I have ever known. I recall that John Paul II referred to a man named Raymond Brown as the premiere Biblical scholar of his century; Ray Brown bequeathed *his* Bible to Dr. Tony Martin. One day in my graduate New Testament Studies class, Dr. Martin got very quiet and serious. All of us were leaning forward, waiting for more genius to come out of his mouth and bless us forever. “Class,” he said solemnly, “I wish to impart to you the most important lesson which I have learned from sixty years of life.” The man who wrote his own 2,000-page dissertation on the topic of *wisdom*, after translating one of his primary sources into English by himself, was about to give us a gemstone of advice as the culmination of a lifetime of growth and brilliance. He took a deep breath, and spoke, “Life will have good times, and life will have bad times. The good times are *better*.” He’s onto something. We don’t like to suffer.

Two of my academics heroes are Saint Thomas Aquinas and Father Servais Pinckaers. Philosophically, I would classify both scholars as “eudaemonists.” The best way for me to explain the term “eudaemonist” is with an invented word: “happiness-ist.” Where a psychologist studies psychology, and an anthropologist studies anthropology, a eudaemonist (a happinessist) studies eudemonia, or the topic of ultimate human happiness. For example, Thomas Aquinas, a doctor of the Catholic Church, wrote his entire *Summa Theologica* based around the foundational question of how to be happy. As a believer in Jesus, his approach is entirely appropriate. In the Christian revelation, the Creator reveals that the original plan for

humankind was in fact a *paradise*. When the Christ arrives, He announces that He comes so that people “might have life and have it more abundantly” (John 10:10). And through Scripture the Lord reveals that the world-to-come will restore paradise, as the old order of things passes away and God wipes the tears from our eyes. “There shall be no more death or mourning, wailing or pain,” says Revelation 21:4. Christianity is onto something here. We don’t like to suffer. We want to be happy.

It sounds obvious enough. But then every year, the season of Lent blows onto the liturgical calendar like a biting, cold, dry wind whose frost kills the garden. All of the sudden, the message becomes suffering, suffering, and some more suffering, as the theology of *dying to self* takes center stage. At least in my own hemisphere, Lent often coincides with the coldest, darkest weeks of the year *after Christmas is over*, forging negative associations even more deeply into my psyche. The tradition asks me to give something up as a purgative Lenten sacrifice. Or I am asked to voluntarily donate my time, treasure, and talents in some constructive way; nevertheless, that allegedly positive endeavor still means extra work and fewer treasures for myself. The topics of discipline, refinement, trials, and sacrifice fill the homilies. Getting rid of our idols, self-denial, fasting, and fish replace summertime t-bones sizzling over an open fire and smelling amazing. Challenging our attachments to earthly things and checking our fleshly appetites, we confront again with special emphasis the reality of the cross.

In truth, we are not in Eden anymore, nor are we in heaven yet. Rather, we are currently in the valley of tears. In this postlapsarian (after the fall) state of affairs, we suffer the effects of the relational fracture with our Maker called *sin*. Even after the waters of Baptism wash over us and we are symbolically buried with and raised to new life in Christ, we still suffer from concupiscence—our disordered priorities. As Saint Paul laments so honestly, even after our conversion to Christ, we do what we don’t want to do, while not doing what we should (Romans 7:19). In the deadly lie of self-sovereignty, we are all born into the twofold darkness of sin and ignorance, and the Church is a hospital for the sick as much as it is a preschool for the immature. In the present order, there is still death, mourning, wailing, and pain. If a person felt like this world was already heaven, something would be very wrong.

In the fall of humanity, it makes sense that we would have to die to self. The right states of loving, happy relationships that made paradise *paradise* were ruptured when the first people caved into a threefold enticement which took a torpedo to their trust in the Heavenly Father. Specifically, the forbidden fruit appealed to the lust of the eyes (it looked pleasing), the lust of the flesh (it appeared to be good for food), and the pride of life (it offered knowledge as God has it) (Genesis 3:6). Of course the Creator had already provided a garden of trees that was beautiful to the eyes, produced fruit good for food, and even the tree of life (Genesis 2:9). In other words, everything found appealing about the forbidden fruit was something already provided, rendering sin fundamentally irrational. More than breaking a rule, it was essentially hearts that were broken.

In Adam’s blame game, he presented his sin as Eve’s fault, and even implied that it was thereby God’s fault, rather than taking responsibility for his own choice (Genesis 3:12). Trust broke, shame manifested, and consequences snowballed through the subsequent generations. Burdensome toil, labor pains, and death were introduced. It was not long before the sin of murder entered into society; after that, the confusion of the different languages. People’s

relationships with God, one another, themselves, and their environment were all damaged. The entire system of governance and social organization that resulted from choosing the lust of the eyes, the lust of the flesh, and the pride of life—the *kingdom of this world*—was an utter catastrophe. In short, it makes perfect sense that in order to live life to the fullest, there is something we have to die to.

The good news is that the sovereign and loving God triumphs over evil, offering rescue to His kidnapped babies, to whosoever wants it. As the recapitulation theology of atonement details, Jesus Christ the triumphant Redeemer *reheads* the human race. In doing so, Christ, the *New Adam*, faces the same trifecta of temptation that the first people faced. In particular, the Lord is led to the wilderness where Satan tempts Jesus according to the lust of the eyes, the lust of the flesh, and the pride of life—that same threefold enticement which deceived our first ancestors (Luke 4:1–13). The devil showed Jesus the earthly kingdoms in all of their splendor, appealing to the lust of the eyes. The devil tempted Jesus to turn stones into bread, appealing to the lust of the flesh. And with the audacity to quote Scripture, Satan challenged Jesus to throw Himself off a precipice to be caught by angels. Such a public show would not only put God to the test, but it would also satisfy the current, limited, and distorted human understanding of the crowds by displaying the Messiah as they expected—a diabolic appeal to the pride of life. But where the first humans responded with sin (covenant rupture), the New Adam responded to the same hat trick of deception with *covenant faithfulness*, rejecting three offers of immediate gratification, and instead trusting the Heavenly Father. The New Adam offered a new starting point to all of humanity, inaugurating the kingdom of God on earth in an unprecedented way. The Kingdom of God comes on earth as it is in heaven.

Through His Word to the creation, our Creator has revealed to us a fascinating aspect of our current state of existence. We were born into the kingdom of this world, the heart-break of paradise lost, whose harmful effects rippled across the whole natural order and deep into our hearts. But we were *meant* for God’s heavenly kingdom. Those who accept God’s rescue thus enter into a life-time journey of ongoing conversion. We were born into an upside-down state of affairs, and God is continually turning His people right side up again. Even though we are being healed and set right in the friendship with God that our Redeemer made possible, following the Lord can feel like getting turned onto our heads daily. To be clear, God is bigger than the wound. But the wound cut deep, and its healing pains are viscerally experienced by the people of God.

“Do not love the world or the things of the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, sensual lust, enticement for the eyes, and a pretentious life, is not from the Father but is from the world. Yet the world and its enticement are passing away. But whosoever does the will of God remains forever.” (1 John 2:15–17)

There they are again: the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, the pride of life—the foundation upon which the kingdom of this world is designed. As I think about my own struggles to grow, those three overlapping areas really capture, with profound accuracy, everything that beguiles me to break the happy bonds of loving relationship with God and neighbor. I find John’s explanation refreshingly clarifying and succinct. Suppose a person were to think some silliness like, “Uh oh, I love to fish, but the Bible just told me that if I love the things of the world, then love of God is not in my heart... do I need to hate fishing now?” Inspired by the Holy Spirit, John clears everything up for us by specifying precisely

what he means by “the things of the world.” The trifacta of temptation that would have us choose *self* at the expense of love-bonds with God and neighbor—*that* is what he is talking about. We can, and should, still enjoy God’s goods, such as fishing. But we need to die to self to find life.

The advancement of God’s kingdom within our own hearts leads to countless reversals: the King being born in a manger, God’s host celebrating with shepherds instead of society’s “V.I.P.s,” *us* receiving the gift on *God’s* birthday, leadership instructed to wash feet, God opposing the proud, God gracing the humble, the meek inheriting the earth, resurrection life coming about through crucifixion brokenness, those professing to be wise becoming fools, the first being last, the last being first, children being first in the kingdom, prostitutes entering the kingdom ahead of scribes, the Maestro playing His symphony through broken instruments, a repentant heart being what pleases God, and, of course, finding life by dying to self.

I submit to you that, as crazy as it might sound to our flesh and bone, dying to self is good news. Lent is not the bitter sting that it may seem, nor is Lent any contradiction to the message of ultimate human happiness that is Christ’s Gospel. On the contrary, *Lent is happy!*

For one, we get to die to this world’s measuring sticks of worth and importance. Power, fame, and money are not the source of our worth; they never were. God’s love is. We don’t have to get beaten up by Satan’s false measuring stick any longer. You don’t have to live one more day comparing yourself to another person and feeling like you don’t measure up, because God has the hairs on your head numbered. God knows you that closely, and is more intimately involved in your daily life than you could possibly imagine.

Ever face a problem by taking an inventory of your own resources, only to come up short and become polluted with panic and anxiety? As you wonder how you’re going to get through it, you discover that your emotional resources are insufficient, your relational resources come up short, your financial, health, and time resources are all not enough to face the trouble—good news: you are realizing what was already always the case, that you are not self-sufficient. You never were. It’s God’s grace that is sufficient for you. You are the beloved of the sovereign, Most High God, radically dependent upon your Creator, and God’s grace is sufficient for you. Apart from Him, you can do nothing. With Him, He will do the impossible. You get to die to the unnecessary burden of self-sufficiency, as the Lord shares your yoke.

Have you ever felt overcome by the guilt of bad choices from your past? Go to Confession, and experience the transforming power of sacramental grace. Have you ever felt overwhelmed by worries about your future, like I tend to do? We get to increasingly die to that. We get to encounter God in the present moment and enjoy the wonder of the interior life, as we allow the Lord to enter more deeply into our hearts than ever before.

Has an idol in your life ever disappointed you? You get to die to that, too. Often, when you tell the idol, “You’re fired,” you reclaim that thing in its proper place as a created good, a gift for you to enjoy. In firing gluttony you reclaim the enjoyment of your daily bread. In firing lust, you can reclaim romance. In firing laziness, you get back the enjoyment of your Sabbath

rest. Life has enough necessary suffering as it is. Idols bring us unnecessary suffering, and we get to die to that. So let's go ahead and fire our idols this Lent. They stunk at the job anyway.

Ever watch the news and become paralyzed by the terror of all the darkness in the kingdom of this world, a culture of death? We are right to be angered by the injustice. But we do not have to live in fear. God said that He is aware of the weeds among the crops. God said that, for now, the weeds and the crops grow side-by-side (Matthew 13:29–30). That means *He's on it*. He knows about that. And we get to die to weed panic. In fact, you can instead turn your attention inward to the weeds and crops that grow side-by-side within—*that* you and God can do something about. You get to be a crop.

Do presidential elections ever frustrate the ever-living daylights out of you, to the point where you are robbed of the fruits of the Holy Spirit? Remember that Jesus wasn't here to capture the capital city of Jerusalem. That was never the throne He was after. Christ's kingdom advances where His reign increases in human hearts. So, this Lent, surrender to the Lord more heart territory than you have yet given over to His Lordship so that joy, peace, hope, friendship, wonder, and healing can all penetrate more deeply than ever before.

There is something we have to die to, in order to live free. Although growing pains are not pleasant at the time, abundant life is good news indeed. In this current upside-down kingdom, some necessary sufferings are indeed a part of our salvation. These necessary sufferings are like the fertilizer of life. In this current order of things, if you want a happy, healthy, and fruit-bearing crop, then you have to put some crap on it.

The kingdom of this world is a backwards mess, but God's heavenly kingdom has come on earth as it is in heaven. Presently, the kingdom of God has some *already* aspects to it, and some *not yet* aspects to it at the same time. Enjoy the already! And when it comes to the not yet, the Redeemer has rendered our momentary sufferings to be extraordinarily meaningful... even to the point of consoling His sacred heart. When Habakkuk asks God how long, God says to hang in there, because He won't disappoint (Habakkuk 2:3).

Happy Lent, my brothers and sisters in Christ!

### **A Sovereignty Prayer**

Lord God Almighty, you are *sovereign*. You are *sovereign*, Lord God Almighty.

In my backwards, disordered state, I find myself inclined to invite you into my day. In reality, it is not *my day*, and what a peaceful relief that already is. It is your day; you are sovereign.

So I do not ask you into my day. Rather, I enter into the day the Lord has made, I rejoice, and I am glad in it.

I do not invite you into my time. Rather, you are the Author of time itself, and I gratefully exist upon the temporal stage which you created for life. Thank you for the dignifying gift of time, and please guide me in using it.

I do not ask, “What is your personal will for my life?” Rather, I ask, “What is the will of God, and where do I fit in that picture?” Thank you for making me a part of your picture. I do not break your Law in a literal sense whenever I sin. Rather, I break against it. Your Law remains perfectly intact.

I do not reenact the past in the gift of the Eucharist. Rather, I *reencounter* what is ever-present to you, in thanksgiving for your love and grace.

You do not “suddenly show up again.” Rather, I come into view again of One who never abandoned me.

I do not fight for victory. Rather, I fight from it. Thank you for your triumph.

And I do not tell you how big the storm is. Rather, I tell the storm how big my God is.

**Titles Mentioned on *Franciscan University Presents*  
“Dying to Self”  
with guest, Dr. Ian Murphy**

**\**Apologia Pro Vita Sua* by John Henry Newman. Penguin Classics. Revised edition.**

**\**The Spirituality of Communion* by John Paul II.**

**\* *Evangelizing Catholics: A Mission Manual for the New Evangelization* by Dr. Scott Hahn. Our Sunday Visitor.**

**\* *The Creed: Professing Our Faith Through the Ages* by Dr. Scott Hahn. Emmaus Road Publishing.**

**\* *The Beggar’s Banquet: A Personal Retreat on Christ, His Mother, the Spiritual Life, and the Saints* by Dr. Regis Martin. Emmaus Road Publishing.**

**\*Available through the Franciscan University Bookstore, 1235 University Blvd., Steubenville, OH 43952. 1-888-333-0381, [www.franciscan.edu/bookstore](http://www.franciscan.edu/bookstore).**

**For the free handout mentioned during the show, visit [FaithandReason.com](http://FaithandReason.com) or contact us at [presents@franciscan.edu](mailto:presents@franciscan.edu) or 1-888-333-0381.**

**View previously aired episodes of *Franciscan University Presents* at [FaithandReason.com](http://FaithandReason.com).**



*Academically Excellent, Passionately Catholic*  
Steubenville, Ohio, USA  
1-800-783-6220, [Franciscan.edu](http://Franciscan.edu)