Lent: The Desert of Purification and Enlightenment

Easter: The Promise of Eternal Life

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What is Lent?

First, I can tell you first, what it is not . . .

- It's not a time to give up some pleasures of the world so that we can lose weight.
- It is not just some meaningless obligation I have to do as a Catholic.
- It's not a time to go through a list of "Catholic things" that we need to do and check off the requirements for the Lenten season.

What then, is Lent? Lent begins on Ash Wednesday where we receive ashes on our forehead to "Remember that we are dust and to dust we shall return." It reminds us of our mortality and that our time here on earth is limited. We should not waste it on things that do not lead us on a path to heaven.

- Ashes are also a sign of repentance as we see in the Book of Jonah when the city of Ninevah repents and they put on sackcloth and ashes. We are being called to repent and live a life of holiness in the Lord.

The word Lent, signifies "springtime." Lent is a time of spiritual growth through repentance from sin, purification and enlightenment. It is a 40-day journey through a spiritual desert to find the answers to who we really are.

- It is a time to look honestly at bad habits or behaviors that need changing.
- Are we a casual follower of Christ, or maybe not a follower at all . . .
- Are we dedicated follower that wants to build, nurture and grow in our relationship with Christ and one another?
- Are we willing to "give of self" – to sacrifice our comforts for the sake of our growth in love of God and love of neighbor? To grow in holiness . . .

Jesus begins his ministry by being baptized by John the Baptist.

Then in Matthew Ch. 4, He is drawn by the Spirit into the desert . . . there he fasts for 40 days. He is preparing for the long, hard journey he is about to embark upon:

- Preaching the Gospel message
- Being rejected by many
- Being sentenced to death on a cross by the people that he came to save

• Experiencing horrific torture and pain

• And at last, He is nailed to a cross and dies a gruesome death

We, too, are being asked this Lent to enter into the desert for 40 days with Christ at our side. We are to become like Him, so we must imitate Him. If the Son of God had to enter the desert to prepare for his journey to the cross, we, too, must travel that same path.

And, ultimately, that journey, like that of Jesus, leads to the CROSS. It may not be a physical crucifixion, but it is a "death" of sorts. A death to SELF. A death to our selfish and sinful desires.

Remember that THIS LIFE IS NOT ABOUT ME . . . IT IS ABOUT LOVE OF GOD AND LOVE OF OTHERS. It is that reminder that "I am THIRD."

Lent: 40 Days of Commitment in the Desert

Lent is a commitment to avail ourselves to the graces the Lord wants to pour out on us. It is like "marriage" - use an analogy.

Last class we discussed the Rite of Election likened to a "marriage proposal."

These 40 days of Lent are like the "engagement "period of a marriage.

• We have committed to give yourself to a single person as a gift of LOVE. In Lent, we do the same . . . you commit to a time of self-reflection to give yourself entirely to Christ, who is the Bridegroom.

• We are also preparing yourself during this time to be the best husband/wife by examining what this life-long commitment entails:

    o Dedication to the duties of a husband/wife

    o Being a faithful spouse

    o Providing for the family according your role as husband or wife

    o In a word, self-sacrifice. To LOVE your spouse by putting their needs ahead of your own.

In the same manner, we prepare ourselves through examination of our current life and take note of what needs to change. What things will I accept as my responsibility?

• The "marriage ceremony" where we recite our vows of fidelity and love. That would be like the 1st half of the Easter service, where we hear the Word of God, just like we experience the words of the marriage vows.

• Then comes the "honeymoon," where "the two become one flesh." That would be like the 2nd half of the Easter service where we, the Church (the bride of Christ) receive Christ in the "one flesh union" through the eating of the bread that is his flesh- in the Eucharist.

- The analogy doesn't end there, because Easter continues for 50 days until the feast of Pentecost where we see the fruits of the "one flesh union" from Easter. And that is that the Holy Spirit, the very life of God, is poured out and gives birth to the Church. In a similar manner, a married couple that have been united in that "life giving embrace of intimate love," they, too, bring forth life through the birth of children.

Our Response to Jesus' Invitation to Follow Him into the Desert

Jesus asks, "Do you trust Me?" "Do you love Me enough to give Me your entire heart? Your entire self? Your entire life?"

Why don't we abandon ourselves to HIM? What are we afraid of? I think we are afraid that if we surrender every aspect of our life to Him, we are going to be required to "leave behind" the baggage that we are so used to carrying. We have become comfortable with things like:

- An unforgiving heart. Why should I forgive those who hurt me? I want them to suffer.
- A lifestyle of sin. There many pleasures in life that are sinful . . .
    - Lust, gluttony, envy, anger, sloth, greed, pride
- In a word, it would require repentance for all that offends God who "is Love." He wants us to love ourselves and one another. Jesus left us a great command, "Love one another as I have loved you." (Jn 15:12)

Our response should be one of prayer, scripture, fasting and almsgiving.

- Prayer: This is part of our enlightenment. One hour of prayer each day. At least 20 minutes of silence and listening to the Lord in that hour of prayer. This time of silence is VERY important – don't skip it. You can spread that hour over the course of the day. Start small if 1 hour is too much.
- Scripture: This is also enlightenment. We must read and meditate on the Word of God DAILY. "Ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ" as St. Jerome said.
- Fasting: On Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. I would recommend fasting every Friday, even though it is not required. It is the practice of "detachment" that we need in order to focus on the more important things of the spirit and it leads to ENLIGHTEMENT.
- Abstinence: No meat on Fridays. Other things to "give up" – alcohol, smoking, video games, unnecessary computer or phone usage, desserts, sweet drinks, snacking between meals… You may say, "I can't do it!" and you would be right, because the problem is the "I" in that statement. But all things are possible with God.
- Almsgiving: Help for the poor, which is above and beyond your regular church offering. This is another form of detachment that leads to ENLIGHTENMENT.

Our sacrifices are meant to be united with the sufferings of Christ that He endured on the cross. St. Paul says in

• Colossians 1:24, “Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking‡ in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the Church

Paul, in a mystical way, is participating in the sufferings of Christ through his own sufferings. He is uniting himself and is “crucifying” himself to the Lord and this suffering benefits the Church.

• Galatians 2:20 I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

Now that we have seen that Lent is a preparation for Easter and beyond, what should we do after Lent is over?

Lent is a time to begin a change in our lives. We are not “done” after Easter, it is a beginning of the transformation that we have achieved during the time of Lent. After Lent is over, we tend to go back to our old ways . . . it’s like reaching a goal for our physical health and once we reach it, we go back to our old, bad eating habits. How about after this Lent, we keep some of those changes that we have made.

• Continue to root out anything that enslaves us . . . those additions in our lives.

• Continue your prayer life and a life of service to the poor as best you can.

• Read your Bible every day! Hear and follow the Word of God.

• Maybe fast once per week or every other week on Fridays.

• Maintain an abstinence from meat or do a work of charity on Fridays.

• Limit the amount of time you spend on social media, or get rid of it altogether.

• Moderate your alcohol consumption and eating habits if you have issues with those things

• And any other practices you can think of . . .

This change in our life is not easy to do, nor easy to maintain. We have to depend on God’s grace to work in us so that we can live a life of holiness that we are called to.

Ask for faith, like the father of the demonic son when Jesus told him that all things are possible if you believe. He said. “I believe, help my unbelief.” (Mk 9:24) “Ask and you shall receive, seek and you shall find” as Jesus also said.

Lent and Easter are a means to and end . . . and that end is to be united to Christ in a more intimate way and be like Him in this life.

‡ 1:24, what is lacking: Christ’s sufferings were, of course, sufficient for our redemption, but all of us may add ours to his, in order that the fruits of his redemption be applied to the souls of men.

Jesus said in John 14:12 that whoever believe in Him would “do greater works than him.” Do you believe that is possible? Jesus said it, so I believe it’s true.