

FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT - 2020

Lent always begins by calling to mind the forty days that Jesus spent in the desert wilderness of Palestine.

It was there that Jesus confronted the temptations faced by all the children of Adam and Eve:

- the temptation to escape self-denial;
- the temptation to be self-serving in our prayer;
- and the temptation to place other things before God.

At the beginning of the Mass on Ash Wednesday we prayed:

Grant, O Lord that we may begin with holy fasting this campaign of Christian service, so that, as we take up the battle against spiritual evils, we may be armed with weapons of self-restraint.

Did you notice that word "campaign"?

The prayer is referring to waging a military campaign, not to politics ... although we will be hearing a lot about "battleground states" in the weeks and months ahead.

Spiritual writers throughout the centuries have referred to Lent as a time "spiritual warfare" against the temptations of the devil and that image still has validity for us today.

The weapons we are given with which to fight the "battle" are fasting, prayer, and charity.

Ultimately, the battle is with our self-will.

You and I know that, like Adam and Eve, we are tempted to be the "god" of our own life, and to relativize God's commands.

In America we consider it a virtue to do things "my way."

Well, sorry Frank, but doing things "my way" instead of God's way usually leads to spiritual trouble.

Lent holds up to us in sharp contrast the example of Jesus who "though he was in the form of God, did not deem equality with God something to be grasped at."

It is only through the kind of "self-emptying" that Jesus models for us that we have any hope of cooperating with God's grace and mercy.

And so, by fasting and "giving things up" for Lent, we are reminded to hunger for God's word and will above all else

... and to say "no" to the limitless consumption of every single thing we think we need.

By spending more time in prayer we tune our hearts to listen for the voice of God and seek the trust-filled surrender of "Thy will be done."

And by our almsgiving we practice charity as well as solidarity with those who in need.

In all of this, as in all things, we are challenged to remember that it is Jesus alone who can win the victory for us.

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As I have said before, Lent is not meant as a time for to prove our spiritual heroism to God.

Instead, the struggles we will inevitably experience during Lent are meant to strip away the loincloths of self-sufficiency that we have sewn for ourselves.

Only then can our nakedness be clothed in the baptismal garment of adoption as sons and daughters of God.

The presence of our new baptismal font is a powerful reminder of the purpose of Lent which is to intensify that which we try to do every day of the year:

To die with Christ so that we can live in Christ.

Ultimately our Lenten journey is a time to celebrate the mercy of God in Christ:

As St. Paul reminds us in today's second reading:

"For, if by the transgression of one, many died, how much more does the grace of God and the gracious gift of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow for the many."