

Homily 1st Sunday of Lent (A)

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My sisters and brothers in Christ:

This past Wednesday we started the season of Lent with the dramatic Liturgy of Ash Wednesday. The symbol of the ashes with which we begin Lent is not coincidental. The liturgy offers us two formulas that can be used at the time of the imposition of the ashes: “repent and believe in the Gospel” and “you are dust and to dust you will return”.

These two formulas remind us about the same reality: that being aware of the brevity of our life on earth can help us live a life of constant conversion.

One of the Hymns of the Liturgy of the Hours for the Lenten season says: “This is our accepted time. This is our salvation; prayer and fasting are our hope, Penance, our vocation”

At the beginning of this Lenten season we are asking God to help us, to give us His Grace that we can take advantage of this special season to, once again, make progress in our Christian life. For that, we need a real conversion, a change of heart, a new way of doing things, a new beginning.

The readings of Today’s Mass point out to us the fact that there are going to be difficulties. In both readings from the Book of Genesis and from St. Matthew’s Gospel, we are presented with temptations stories.

The 1st reading is about our First Parents, Adam and Eve, the temptation from the devil and their sin of Pride and disobedience.

“The serpent said to the woman, No! You will not die! God knows in fact that on the day you eat it your eyes will be opened and you will be like gods, knowing good and evil ... The woman saw that the tree was good for food, pleasing to the eyes, and desirable for gaining wisdom. So she took some of its fruit and ate it; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it”

Jesus was also asked to choose between God and Satan; his decision was to remain faithful to God’s law and revelation: “At this, Jesus said to him, ‘Get away, Satan! It is written: ‘The Lord, your God, shall you worship and him alone shall you serve...’”

It seems to me that the first thing that we can learn from Today’s readings is the existence of temptations and the reality of sin. Sin is real, it exists: “it is a word, deed or desire in opposition to the eternal law” (St. Augustine).

As I wrote in my pastoral letter last year: “To deny the reality of God and sin is to deny our own human experience and the testimony of the Gospel. As the apostle John wrote, “If we say, ‘We are without sin,’ we deceive ourselves” (1 John 1:8). We sin when we abuse the divine gift of freedom with which we were born. God created us with the freedom to choose—either to love him or not to love him. All our sins can be described as failures to love God, failures caused by our selfish desires and attitudes. That is why St. Augustine defined sin as “love of oneself even to contempt of God.”

When we sin we “disown” God as our Father, we reject our relationship as his sons and daughters. As a result, we hurt ourselves because we were made to be his children and to

live by his grace. We also injure our fellowship with others because, in denying God's fatherhood, in effect we deny that we are sisters and brothers to one another. This is why our personal sins always have consequences in society" nn. 11 & 12.

Sin is the **real obstacle** in our life: there is no possibility of improvement in our spiritual life when there is sin, especially if we are in a permanent state of sin.

It is important for us then, to reject sin and that starts with 'avoiding the occasion of sin'. In today's first reading Adam and Eve were presented with a temptation. They were given a choice between God and the serpent; they made the decision to sin, which resulted in Original Sin: a radical separation from God. They were expelled from Paradise and lost their happiness and their friendship with God.

Jesus, in today's passage of the Gospel, was also asked to choose and he decided to be faithful to God the Father and after that he started his public life that will end in his Redemptive Sacrifice, which gives us the possibility of a personal and intimate relationship with God, and in His Glorious Resurrection on Easter Sunday.

Temptation gives us a choice, requires a decision, and ends with either a separation or a more intimate relationship with God.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church reminds us that "The Holy Spirit makes us discern between trials, which are necessary for the growth of the inner man, and temptation, which leads to sin and death. We must also discern between being tempted and consenting to temptation. Finally, discernment unmasks the lie of temptation, whose object appears to be good, a "delight to the eyes" and desirable, when in reality its fruit is death" (2847).

So today, we ask the Holy Spirit to grant us His strength that we can identify the temptation and, with the help of the Grace of God be faithful. God allows us to be tempted so that we may grow in virtue. Jesus teaches through his example –no one is exempt from trials and tribulations.

But, God is always at our side. We have Jesus' example, strength and support to meet those challenges in our daily lives. St. Paul tell us in the 1 Letter to the Corinthians: “No testing has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your strength, but with the temptation will also provide the way of escape, so that you may be able to endure it” 1 Cor. 10, 13.

Lent is a special time in the life of Church when we commemorate the 40 days that Jesus spent in the desert, getting ready for His public life. “A time of solitude for Jesus in the desert immediately after his baptism by John. Driven by the Spirit into the desert, Jesus remains there for forty days without eating; he lives among wild beasts, and angels minister to him. At the end of this time Satan tempts him three times, seeking to compromise his filial attitude toward God. Jesus rebuffs these attacks ...” CCC, 538.

Lent then, must be a special time for us. As followers of Jesus, we should try to imitate His example. Lent should be a time of penance, prayer and conversion. A yearly preparation to gain strength and to grow in the love of God.

Traditionally, we get stronger ‘giving up’ something and through fast and abstinence. There is also a long standing tradition of attending daily Mass. All of these practices are a great help to intensify our prayer.

“Victory, the Catechism says, become possible only through prayer. It is by his prayers that Jesus vanquishes the tempter” (CCC, 2849). As Jesus said to the Apostles: “Watch and pray, that you may not enter into temptation” St. Mt. 26, 41

Prayer, Pope Benedict XVI said this past week is “the engine of the world” and the first weapon for winning the battle against evil, together with penance and fasting, characterize the period of Lent, which is “a providential occasion for making our hope more vibrant and firm”.

“True prayer is the engine of the world, because it keeps it open to God. For this reason, without prayer there is no hope, only illusion... “Thanks to the joint action of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving, Lent in its entirety forms Christians to become men and women of hope, following the example of the saints”” Pope Benedict XVI, 2/6/08.

Let’s intensify our prayer time during the Lenten season. It can be just a few minutes every day, a visit to the Blessed Sacrament in the closest Parish. Maybe a mystery of the Rosary as a family.

Then, Lent will be a very special time of grace for all of us. May Mary our Blessed Mother, Teacher of prayer, help us to make the best of this Lenten season. Amen.