

Revival 10 A Desert Journey: The Spirituality of Lent

Leader: In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

All: **Amen.**

Leader: Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful

All: **And kindle in them the fire of your love.**

Leader: Send forth your Spirit, and they shall be created

All. **And You shall renew the face of the earth.**

Leader: Let us pray.

All: **O God, who by the light of the Holy Spirit, did instruct the hearts of the faithful, grant that by the same Holy Spirit we may be truly wise and ever enjoy His consolations. Through Christ Our Lord. Amen.**

A Reading from the Holy Gospel according to Mark

It happened in those days that Jesus came from Nazareth of galilee and was baptized in the Jordan by John. On coming up out of the water he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit, like a dove, descending upon him. And a voice came from the heavens, “you are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.” At once the Spirit drove him out into the desert, and he remained in the desert for forty days, tempted by Satan. He was among the wild beasts, and the angels ministered to him.

The Gospel of the Lord.

Reflection by Fr. Frank

Welcome back to Revival. Let me begin with a question done of our you are expecting...but I promise it will make sense in a few minutes. Any of you been to the Haunted Mansion at Disneyland? It is a regular stop for me when I am there. The most entertaining part of the whole ride, for me anyway, is actually after the ride walking by the “gift store”. The gift stand there is called “memento mori”. It’s a pun because, even though we call gifts mementos, in Latin “memento mori” literally means “reminder of death”, which I always find funny because this is supposed to be the happiest place on earth. However, in the Catholic spiritual tradition, memento mori is actually meant to be a good thing, a heathy reminder that we are in fact mortal, that we do not get to live in this life forever, and that we cannot save ourselves. We need a savior. We need Jesus.

The spirituality of Lent begins with such a memento mori. On Ash Wednesday, ash is marked on our heads with the reminder, “remember you are dust and to dust you shall return”. The ashes and the denial of earthly pleasures remind us that our lives ought to be focused more on things that matter for eternity rather than on things that turn to dust.

As we will see on the first Sunday of Lent following Ash Wednesday, Lent is a season when we journey with Jesus for 40 days and 40 nights in the desert. A desert is of course a place of dryness, a place that is hot and uncomfortable. A desert is also a place that can purify and enlighten us as we can see with the Gospel story of Jesus being led out into the desert for forty days where he was tempted by the devil. We can also think about the Hebrews journeying in the desert for forty years. They needed that time of purification and enlightenment before they could be ready to inherit the Promised Land.

For us, this journey of purification and enlightenment will begin by focusing on the three virtues of prayer, fasting and almsgiving. We spend more time in prayer because our relationship with God begins first and foremost with talking to him and spending time with him. We can use that time to give thanks to God for the gift of our lives while also interceding for the needs of others. More on that in a minute.

We practice penances like fasting so to remember that there is more to the world than meets the eye. By denying ourselves something we strengthen our will in other areas of our life. I think you will agree with me that we are simply way too comfortable in our culture and our comforts have a way of leading us away from God rather than to him. This is why a journey into a desert sometimes can be a very good thing. The desert teaches us to rely on God more than ourselves and our comforts.

We practice almsgiving, the art of spending money on charity, because everything we have is a gift from God and it is a good thing to help those who are less fortunate than ourselves. Do you know what the favorite song on the hearts of all Americans? It goes like Do-Re-Me-Me-Me-Me! Giving generously to those in need, particularly through organizations that serve the poor, is a very good thing for the soul. An easy way to do this is through Catholic Relief Service’s Operation Rice Bowl. These little boxes are available in the narthex if you want one.

Back to prayer, I believe the best kind of prayer is the prayer of the heart when we simply talk to God like we would talk to anyone we truly love and to allow for periods of silence when the Lord is given the opportunity to communicate to our hearts, as His custom, in a way that transcends the need for words. This is why I like adoration of the Blessed Sacrament so much. The rosary is also a helpful prayer because it is like a mantra that erases from the mind the daily clutter we accumulate every day. Daily reading of scripture is also helpful, even if it looks like focusing on just one book perhaps or randomly hopping around from story to story. These are a few suggestions among many different ways we can pray.

When it comes to fasting, the church gives a minimum expectation, as follows: Catholics between the ages of 18 and 59 are obliged to fast on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. All Catholics 14 years old and older must abstain from meat on Ash Wednesday, Good Friday and all the Fridays of Lent. Fasting as explained by the U.S. bishops means partaking of only one full

meal. Some food (not equaling another full meal) is permitted at breakfast and around midday or in the evening—depending on when a person chooses to eat the main or full meal. Abstinence forbids the use of meat, but not of eggs, milk products or condiments made of animal fat. Fish is OK because the resurrected Lord ate fish with the disciples and the early Christians used the fish symbol as a symbol of being Christians. This was in part due to the handy acronym found in the Greek word for fish, Jesus Christ Son of God Savior.

As I share every year, I think people get caught up on the soft ball approach the bishops give us in these expectations. It is good to remember that these are the minimum expectations meant to make this season accessible to the most amount of people. It is OK to be vegetarian on days of fasting and abstinence, the Fridays during Lent, and to eat less than what is expected provided we are in good health. And if we accidentally forget to abstain on one of these days, don't freak out. That is why God created tomorrow! At first if you don't succeed, try, try again! Remember, it is a desert. We trip sometimes in the wilderness. The point is to get back up again.

It is also in the spirituality of Lent to give up something small until Easter. Some of you kids may have the practice in your household of staying away from candy until Easter Sunday, etc. What is that about? We do this in part because it is actually very good to remind ourselves every so often: who is in control of our appetites. We think we have control over our creature comforts, but Lent can test that. Do we have control over our comforts or do our comforts have control over us? A suggestion therefore during Lent could be to identify some habitual comfort that you practice each day and abstain from it for a while. It doesn't matter what that habitual comfort is per se. It could be that can of coke I like to drink. It could be the ice cream I like to eat or maybe that video game I like to play. What matters is that the thing we are giving up for a few weeks has become habitual. The practice of abstaining from something that is habitual helps us to strengthen our will. It is good for the soul. We know the saying: the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak. When it comes to abstaining from something habitual we can discover that the spirit is just as weak as the flesh at times. Little practices of fasting or abstaining from something habitual will strengthen our will power, making us spiritually stronger. This is why we practice fasting and penance in general. Like I said, it is good for the soul.

It is also OK in Lent to also consider the practice of taking up a new virtue that in time may become a good habit, like praying a decade of the rosary each morning or night, a little scriptural reading each day, engaging in spiritual reading, performing an intentional random act of kindness each day that you report to God in your nighttime prayer, you get the picture. The point of all this is that Lent is a time when we do not sit around. It is a time that we are doing something. We are taking action in our spiritual life. This is why, as Church, we begin the season of Lent with the virtues of praying, fasting, and almsgiving.

Back to Disneyland and the Haunted Mansion, I find it very interesting from an anthropological perspective that humanity simply knows instinctually that there is life after death. It is everywhere in our culture, even at the "happiest place on earth"! On Ash Wednesday, we will be receiving our own memento mori and we allow ourselves to be marked with ash on our forehead with the reminder, we are dust and to dust we shall return. For Christians, such thoughts are not morbid but rather an invitation to consider what is really and truly most

important in life. A memento mori reminds us that, since time is limited, we should not wait to tomorrow what we should be doing today, particularly with our relationships at home, at school, at work and in our community. A memento mori encourages us to be a little more kind, and little more charitable, and a little more careful because life is a precious, precious and fragile gift. With faith in Jesus, a memento mori never leads us to a place of despair. Even though we are conscious in a healthy way that we cannot save ourselves, it is only when we realize at a deep and existential place in our hearts that we need saving when Christ can now actually be our Lord and savior. That Good News, my friends, the Jesus in fact loves you, is at the heart of the spirituality of Lent which begins one week from today.

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

Guidance for the rest of the evening

At this time, I get to guide you through the rest of this evening. We will again begin with exposition of the Blessed Sacrament. As I mentioned, it is an activity we call “adoration”. We believe Jesus is truly present in the Holy Eucharist and this is an opportunity to commune with Him. Soon after we begin adoration, I will then invite our young people enrolled for our Revival small groups to quietly move in the direction of their group leaders. There is no expectation other than being present; however, you are welcome to participate. The questions for conversation are on the handout. There are no wrong answers. The rest of us will stay and pray for you.

The main reason for these circles however is just an opportunity to offer a prayer at the end for whatever it is you are asking of God right now. You will be invited to light a candle representing that prayer and to bring that candle to place on the steps of the altar, to Jesus. After you put the candle on the steps of the altar, in reverence consider stepping aside and genuflect, making the sign of the cross, and then pray back at your seat for the others. I invite our group leaders to please be back here by 7:50 at the latest, so we don’t feel rushed. The evening will wrap up shortly thereafter with prayer and benediction. My heartfelt gratitude to all of you for being here tonight. Please stand.