

Understanding Lent

Although the celebration of Lent began in the Catholic Church, it is not exclusively a Catholic practice. For example, it is common for Methodists, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Orthodox, Lutherans and others to celebrate Lent in some form. The word "lent" was originally a Teutonic word that meant the spring season. During the Anglo-Saxon era it was the term used to translate the Latin word *quadragesima*, meaning the "forty days," or more literally the "fortieth day."

During the first three centuries of the Christian era there were great variances in the fasting observance before Easter. Writing to Pope Victor near the end of the second century, St. Irenaeus observed: "some think they ought to fast for one day, others for two days, and others even for several, while others reckon forty hours both of day and night to their fast."

In his *Festal Letters* (331 A.D.) St. Athanasius enjoined his flock to fast for forty days preliminary to, but not inclusive of, the stricter fast of Holy Week. Subsequently, in 339 he wrote in the strongest terms to urge this observance upon the people of Alexandria because the forty days fast was universally practiced.

In the time of Pope Gregory the Great (590-604) the fasting at Rome during Lent lasted six days excluding Sunday during the six weeks before Easter, making thirty-six fast days in all. At a later date the wish to realize the exact number of forty days led to the present practice of beginning Lent on Ash Wednesday.

The Lenten season in the Catholic Church is connected with Jesus' temptations after a forty-day fast when he undid the infidelity of the first Adam. Adam was called to be a priest, a prophet, and a king. As a **priest** he was called to be a conduit and protector of *life*. He was a conduit of life as a biological and spiritual father. God commanded Adam to "cultivate" and "care" for the garden of Eden (Gen 2:15) just before He gave Adam the command not to eat of "the tree of knowledge of good and evil" (Gen 2:17). The translation "care" is a weak rendering of the Hebrew word *shamar*, which means to "guard" or "defend." This command conveys two ideas. First, it indicates there is an external threat. Second, it implies there is something in Eden that is valuable. In the context of God's command and the aftermath, it is clear that Adam's soul and the soul of his bride were the precious objects that needed defending.

As a **prophet**, Adam was called to be a conduit of *truth*. He is charged with communicating God's command to Eve. Finally, as a **king** Adam was called to lovingly *serve* his wife and their future children. He would accomplish this through the cultivation of natural creation and as the spiritual leader of his family.

Eve compliments Adam in his three-fold office as mother, prophetess, and queen. As the biological **mother** of the living Eve was uniquely a conduit of *life*. As a

prophetess Eve shared in the spiritual formation of her children for she was also called to be a conduit of *truth*. Also as the one loved, the heart of the family, Eve was called to model *how men and women respond faithfully to God*, the heavenly husband. Finally, as a **queen** Eve was called to a life of *service*, and to assist her husband as the spiritual leader in the family.

In the third chapter of Genesis the devil seduces Adam and Eve into sin. He says to the woman:

“You certainly will not die [He both lies and contradicts God.!] No, God knows well that the moment you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like gods who know what is good and what is bad” (Gen 3:4-5).

This is the critical point in the temptation because the devil questions the heavenly Father’s love. He is saying in effect: “God does not love you. He is holding back the gift of love and life because he is selfishly trying to protect his privileged position. He knows that when you eat of the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil, you will be like him making your own rules. Then you will determine what is right and wrong. Don’t trust God. So, if you want to be free, be like me and take it.”

Tragically, the guard Adam is silent. When the devil questioned the Father’s love and integrity, Adam should have spoken out: “Hallowed be His name.” When they were tempted to set up a reign in opposition to God, she should have proclaimed: “His kingdom come, and His will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” When the devil tried to seduce Eve to deny God’s gift of life and love, Adam should have asserted: “The good Father will give us our daily bread, we don’t have to take it.” Finally, in his confrontation with the anti-Word, Adam should have cried out to the Father: “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.” The Lord’s Prayer is not merely a beautiful prayer that Jesus taught, but a synopsis of the life he lived. No wonder the *Catechism* calls it “the summary of the whole gospel” (CCC # 2700).

Because there was no challenge to the devil’s beguiling lies Eve’s focus was fixed on the deception. The Bible simply tells us: “The woman saw that the tree was:

- 1) “good for food,” that is, capable of giving **pleasure**,
- 2) “pleasing to the eyes,” therefore alluring to **possess**, and
- 3) “desirable for gaining wisdom,” that is, enticing to give **power**,

“So she took some of its fruit and ate it” (Gen 2:6). Eve didn’t bite into an apple, she bit into the lie that she could short-cut the road to happiness by doing things her way, according to *her* ideas. This is a deception that many, many bite into today. Notice what captivated her imagination: pleasure, possessions, and power.

St. John addressed these alluring dangers in his first letter:

“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, [1] *sensual lust*, [2] *enticement for the eyes*, and a [3] *pretentious life*, is not from the Father but from the world” (1 Jn 2:15-16).

Other translations render these key words as: “*lust of the eyes*, *lust of the flesh*, and the *pride of life*.” Lust indicates desires that are misdirected and disordered. Power,

sex, and money are good in themselves, but the inordinate desire for power, sex, and money is evil.

Adam showed no willingness to lay down his life for his bride by challenging the devil. In failing to protect Eve's soul, Adam also failed to protect Eve's heart. Because he already played the coward by not protecting Eve, it was an easy step to swallow the same deception that seduced her.

Centuries later Jesus, the new Adam, would utterly defeat Satan on a hill called Golgotha. Jesus began his formal assault on the kingdom of Satan in four steps:

- 1) He is baptized in the Jordan;
- 2) He is filled with the Holy Spirit;
- 3) He is driven into the desert;
- 4) He is tempted by the devil.

This sequence is instructive. The sinless Jesus begins by assuming the humble role of a sinner coming to John for baptism. Fr. Damian would address his lepers in the second person, "*you* lepers." Then the time came when he addressed them in the first person, "*we* lepers." Jesus assumed the debt of the leprosy of sin He didn't own, because we who contracted the disease and owed the debt couldn't pay it. As a result Jesus was "filled with the Holy Spirit" (Lk 4:1) who "drove" Jesus into the desert (Mk 1:12) where he would confront and defeat Satan. The devil cunningly waited until Jesus was physically vulnerable because He hadn't eaten in forty days.

Temptation # 1

"If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread" (Mt 4:3).

Notice that the focus of the devil's inducement is the appetite. Bread is good. God doesn't want anyone to starve, so why not work a little miracle? We can only imagine how enticing Satan made bread sound. The real issue, of course, was not food, but doing the devil's bidding not the Father's will. Jesus responded:

"Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" (Mt 4:4).

In resisting the pull of his appetite Jesus gives us the strength to control ourselves in the areas of food, drink, drugs, sexual misconduct, and pornography.

Temptation # 2

"Then the devil took him to the holy city, and set him on the pinnacle of the temple, and said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, He will give his angels charge of you, and On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone'" (Mt 4:5-6).

The devil cleverly used Psalm 91:11-12. Making a grand display gets people's attention. After all, the Father wants to save mankind. Why not begin with an impressive display that will capture everyone's imagination? Besides, it's the smart way to avoid the terrible suffering of Calvary! Who wants to be humiliated and suffer tortures and death when it is unnecessary?

Most heresies are connected with the misuse of Scripture. Often because one passage is exaggerated and other counter balancing passages are ignored. Jesus rejected the devil's distortion and cut to the chase:

“You shall not tempt the Lord your God” (Mt 4:7).

The devil was allowed to move Jesus physically, but he couldn't budge him spiritually. Thus, Jesus can give us his strength to resist the numerous tendencies to pride and adulation.

Temptation # 3

“Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain, and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them; and he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me” (Mt 4:8-9).

The things of this world can appear very enticing. Possessions and wealth are good in themselves, but humans are easily captivated by the acquisition of things: fancier homes, newer cars, expensive clothes and jewelry, bigger TV sets, etc. Many of us sell our souls for much less than the whole world.

Jesus brusquely dismisses Satan as a ridiculous pretend God and the greatest of fools:

“Begone, Satan! for it is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve’” (Mt 4:10).

In this way Jesus guides us to put God first by resisting the allure of wealth and power.

The season of Lent is a time of spiritual renewal when we are “led by the Spirit” (Mt 4:1) to confronting the devil by correctly ordering in our lives in the areas of pleasure, possessions, and pride – sex, money and power. We often discover that there is much of the first Adam and Eve in us.

The critical first step always begins with a personal repentance, as we confess at Mass: “in *my thoughts* and in *my words*, in what *I have done*, and in what *I have failed to do*.” Lent affords us the extended opportunity to cry out with David: “My sin is ever before me” (Ps 51:3). The tears of repentance are the softening agent that makes us malleable in God's hands so He can reshape us into Christ. When confronting the reality of our unfaithfulness, we are also reminded of Jesus' dying prayer: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Lk 23:34). During Lent Jesus stands at the door of our hearts like a beggar asking to come in. “O that today you would harken to his voice,” pleads Psalm 95! “Harden not your hearts” (Ps 95:7-8).

Fasting focuses on the proper ordering of our appetites. So while the immediate focus is on food, we are challenged to get a better control of all our appetites, particularly in regard to our sexuality. **Alms giving** have also been an important part of Lent. Here we are challenged to prioritize our finances by putting God and the poor first. This prevents us from centering our life on money, success, and things – an easy trap in our materialistic society.

Above all, Lent calls us to meet and embrace Jesus in a radical way.

1. Eusebius, Hist. Eccl., V, xxiv.

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