

First Sunday in Lent (A)
March 5, 2017.

‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only Him’ (Mt. 4:11).

On Ash Wednesday we began the observance of the holy season of Lent with the imposition of blessed ashes, an external sign of our interior resolve to undertake Lenten penance. *By the solemn forty days of Lent the Church unites herself each year to the mystery of Jesus in the desert (The Catechism of the Catholic Church, 510).* As this mystery is described and revealed by St. Matthew, Our Lord confronts the Devil’s temptations with *the sword of the spirit, which is the Word of God (Eph. 6:17).* St. Gregory the Great observes that in so doing Our Lord was *giving us an example; that when we suffer anything at the hands of evil men, we should be stirred up to learning rather than revenge (St. Thomas Aquinas, Catena Aurea, St. Matthew, Vol. I, p. 122).* The temptations we endure can lead us to a deeper knowledge of ourselves and of God’s merciful love. Indeed, *all things work for the good for those who love God (Rom. 8:28).*

The temptations experienced by Our Lord like all temptations are an invitation to do wrong. We easily understand this; and for this reason, in the prayer that Our Lord Himself taught us, we pray: *lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.* We face temptations in a variety of ways. We may be tempted either from without or from within. External or environmental factors such as bad company, bad entertainment, and lack of moral guidance or places of ill repute may tempt us to sin; or our own desires may be the cause of temptation or sin: pride, envy, impure thoughts and desires, grudges. Regardless of the origin, what we do is never frivolous. Our lives mean something to God and to everyone around us, especially to those closest to us. Evil means that by what we do in this world, we can choose implicitly or explicitly to reject God’s invitation to participate in His eternal life; for God included freedom in creation’s plan. Freedom is the ability to choose the good; and in endowing us with freedom God included the possibility of rejection. Yet in His mercy, as we read in the Book of Wisdom, God fills us with good hope, because He gives *repentance for sins (12:19).* St. Paul declared that *where sin abounds, grace abounds all the more (Rom. 5:20).* In other words, God’s response to sin is love; a love that calls us to repent and to believe in the Gospel. Hence the cry of the Psalmist in the famous *Miserere* Psalm: *have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love... Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me (Ps. 51).*

This is why we can speak of the joy of repentance and regard this Lenten time of penance as *a gracious gift each year* during which we *await the sacred paschal feasts with the joy of minds made pure, so that more eagerly intent on prayer and on the works of charity... [we] may be led to the fullness of grace (Preface I of Lent, The Roman Missal).* To undertake the discipline of Lent as we have, means that we seek this *fullness of grace* and to establish ourselves on the firm foundation of God’s merciful love. To present oneself to be marked by ashes is an act of humility. Yet it is no less an act of great hope for despite the symbolism of death in these ashes, we see that the God who *formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life (Gen. 2:9),* is also the God who become Man for our salvation and His *act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all people (Rom. 5:18).* Jesus is the new Adam whose vicarious death brings the offer of salvation and grace to the whole human race. He teaches us by His life and death to bear one another’s burdens. St. Paul the Apostle understood this mystery and

so he formulated a saying that we do well to take to heart as we follow Our Lord along the path of devout humility: *Bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ (Gal. 6:2)*. This saying and all it implies however, only make sense if we truly appreciate that our lives mean something to God and to everyone around us.

The Church is a school of charity where we learn to *bear one another's burdens*. The Church is a living communion with Jesus Christ and He invites us to imitate the pattern of His own life. Just as He *went about all the cities and villages, teaching ... and preaching the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every infirmity (Mt. 9:35)*, so the Church makes known the truth and love of Christ as Mother and Teacher (*Mater et Magistra*) of the nations. Through our works of mercy the Church endeavours to alleviate the physical and the spiritual or moral burdens that sin always imposes. Nothing good ever comes from sin. Perhaps more than at any other time in our history the Church faces a temptation that seeks to reduce her relevance solely to social and material issues. Man however, *does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God*. The Church is first and foremost the universal sacrament of salvation; and we therefore especially take to heart the words that rebuked the devil himself: *'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only Him'* (Mt. 4:11). We don't worship the state, or the environment or any other ideology in vogue.

'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only Him' (Mt. 4:11). This command is our point of reference always; and our yearly observance of Lent is a summons to each one of us as we seek to live an integrated life in Christ to weave together what we know from faith and reason, what we are experiencing in our own times and what we are experiencing in our own inner conversion. From all these forces and influences our life comes forth; and we endeavour to submit ourselves to the logic of God's truth and purpose for humanity. Our lives do mean something to God and to everyone around us, especially to those closest to us. Let us live for God and let us serve Him with grateful hearts. St. Paul reminds us: *None of us lives to himself and none of us dies to himself... so whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's (Rom. 14:7-9)*.

All temptation, whatever its origin is always a temptation to put something else before God. In the adoration that we render to God in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass we learn to *serve only Him (Mt. 4:11)*. Here we are given to see, to hear and to receive the summons to a deeper and more meaningful life. This is what we endeavour to learn and to deepen through our worship always, and in this Lenten season through our voluntary acts of penance, fasting and almsgiving we are more perfectly conformed to the pattern of Our Lord's earthly life. Our Lenten obedience and our union with the mystery of Jesus in the desert lead to the Sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross. The self-denial and penances of this season are not ends in themselves. They dispose our hearts and minds to the gift of God's grace and the understanding of the Mystery of the Cross. The science of the Cross is at the heart of authentic Christian discipleship and so at the beginning of this holy season above all we pray for the grace to come to a deeper awareness of the power of the Cross and of our own participation in this Mystery.