

**First Sunday in Lent (B)**  
**February 22, 2015.**

*After Jesus was baptized, the Spirit drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan (Mk. 1:12).*

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; so that with purified minds and bodies we may celebrate the Paschal Mystery at Easter. The Passion and Death of Jesus bring His public life to an end. The beginning of His public life is cryptically described by St. Mark with words we have just heard: *After Jesus was baptized, the Spirit drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan (Mk. 1:12).* The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* notes that our Lord's *whole life is a mystery of redemption. Redemption comes to us above all through the blood of his cross, but this mystery is at work throughout Christ's entire life* (517). The *Catechism* also states that *by the solemn forty days of Lent the Church unites herself each year to the mystery of Jesus in the desert* (510). The mystery of Jesus in the desert is the key that enables us to understand the events of our Lord's Passion. His temptation in the desert reveals the way in which Jesus is the Messiah. He is the obedient, Suffering Servant spoken of in the prophecy of Isaiah, who will achieve His mission of redemption by His total obedience to the divine will.

The mystery of Jesus in the desert to which the Church unites herself is the mystery of our Lord's obedience and this obedience is a free, rational obedience. Of this we must be absolutely clear. Our Lord Himself said: *I lay down my life that I may take it again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again (Jn. 10:17-18).* Our Lord who calls us to repentance does not deprive us of the freedom to ignore His summons. Just as freedom is bound to God's very being, so too is freedom bound to our own being. Freedom however, is not licence and submission is not slavery; for God has a will ordained to His reason and being. Our will, properly exercised is also ordained to what is reasonable and life-giving. Our Lenten discipline is in essence, a deliberate effort to conform our own will to the logic of God's own Being.

The traditional forms of penance undertaken during this holy season, namely, fasting, penance, and almsgiving allow us access into the mystery of our Lord's obedience. By self-denial, discipline and other forms of penance we *humble our sinful pride* (Preface III of Lent, *The Roman Missal*) and with minds made pure we are better able to understand the meaning of our Lord's Passion, Death and Resurrection and so live in the freedom of the sons of God. Our external forms of penance express an internal attitude of submission to the will of God, of trust in His Providence, of compassion for others, especially those most in need of God's mercy. The devotions which are also traditionally associated with this holy season such as the Stations of Cross likewise help us to conform ourselves to the mystery of our Lord's obedience. The sacrifice of our Lord on the Cross is both His supreme act of obedience and the unique and definitive sacrifice, completing and surpassing all other sacrifices (cf. *Heb. 10:10*).

During this holy season both the Church, and through the Church, the world, are brought to the Cross of our Lord. In the starkness of this Lenten season our gaze is directed to the Cross of our Lord, *who in freedom and love offered his life to his Father through the Holy Spirit in reparation for our disobedience (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 614)*. The sobriety of this season of grace brings us to a consideration of the only thing that really matters: our life in God. *But far be it from me to glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world (Gal. 6:14)*. Our Lord says, *If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross, and follow me (Mt. 16:24)*. Our individual response to this invitation is likewise given in freedom and this is what gives value to our discipleship. We who endeavour to be disciples of Jesus can participate in His sacrifice and in our own unique circumstances and time we are challenged to give a human face to the Love and Providence of God as we walk in the footsteps of Christ. This past week the world was given to see the truth of these words in the martyrdom of twenty-one Egyptian Christians, members of the Coptic Church. As they were brutally murdered, they were seen to utter the Holy Name of Jesus; the only Name by which man is saved. Martyred for their Christian faith, they participated in His sacrifice.

These martyrs are one with us as we offer the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. Our reverent and prayerful participation in the Eucharistic Sacrifice is the surest way to enter into the Mystery of the Lord's Passion. We therefore undertake this Lenten journey anew with our gaze directed towards the Paschal Mystery that *every* Mass makes present. The Eucharist is the *Sacramentum caritatis Christi, the Sacrament of the love of Christ*, through which our Lord continues to draw us all to Himself, as He did when raised up on the Cross (cf. *Jn. 12:32*). 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 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. May we profit from our penance and self-denial. May we grow in charity and may the fruits of our Lenten penance be shared in abundance with the poor; but first and foremost, may we deepen our knowledge of the Mystery of the Cross; for the Passion of our Lord gives a human face to the love of God for a fallen humanity. Jesus Crucified is both the power and the wisdom of God. His power can become our power, His wisdom our wisdom, His freedom our freedom. The example of the Coptic martyrs strengthens our resolve *to know nothing...except Jesus Christ and Him crucified (1 Cor. 2:2)*. May their courage in their time of trial enable us to value above all things *the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord (Phil. 3:8)*.