

***First Sunday in Lent (C)***  
***February 14, 2016.***

*When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time (Lk. 4:13).*

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. Luke, the temptations endured by Our Lord are three in number. These temptations reveal to us something of how the devil can also tempt us. St. Ambrose explains that *there are three special weapons which we are taught the devil is wont to arm himself with, that he may wound the soul of man. One is of appetite, another of boasting, the third ambition (St. Thomas Aquinas, Catena Aurea, St. Luke, Vol. III, p. 145).*

St. Ambrose further explains that St. Luke *would not have said that all temptation was ended, had there not been in the three temptations which have been described the materials for every crime; for the causes of temptations are the cause of desire, namely, delight of the flesh, the pomp of vain-glory [and] the greediness of power (Ibid., p. 151).* What St. Ambrose calls *greediness for power* is what St. Augustine describes in his monumental work, *The City of God*, as the *lust of domination (libido dominandi)*; the lust for power, advantage and glory. Our Lord clearly taught us that this is the way of the world and not the way of the Christian. *'You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you; but whoever will be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave; even as the Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many' (Mt. 20: 25-28).* The whole of Divine Revelation is seen in *the humility of the Creator in becoming incarnate and the humility of the creature in welcoming Him.* Appropriating this humility is the work of a lifetime and it is the path that is especially set before us during the holy season of Lent.

St. Augustine acknowledged that *great is the effort needed to convince the proud of the power and excellence of humility, an excellence which makes it soar above all the summits of this world, which sway in their temporal instability (The City of God, Bk. 1, Preface).* It is an effort that necessarily first and foremost engages each one of us in our own interior struggle to conform ourselves to the gentle and humble Heart of Our Saviour. 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 and humility. 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. 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 humble obedience.

In our own particular manner and in the concrete circumstance of our life, each one of us is engaged in a disciplined effort to conform ourselves to the pattern of Our Lord's life and especially His

Sacred Passion. St. Thomas Aquinas teaches us in very simple terms that *the passion of Christ completely suffices to fashion our lives. Whoever wishes to live perfectly should do nothing but disdain what Christ disdained on the cross and desire what He desired, for the cross exemplifies every virtue* (Collatio 6 super Credo in Deum). This is why Our Lord left us the Mass as the Memorial of His Sacred Passion. Indeed, *the Mass is the only moment that transforms man on this earth*. This is the insight, again expressed in very simple terms, of Robert Cardinal Sarah, an African Cardinal from Guinea, West Africa. He was appointed Prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments by Pope Francis in 2014. For my Lenten reading I am reading an autobiographical interview with this remarkable man. Its title is *God or Nothing*, and I highly recommend it to you. *The Mass is the only moment that transforms man on this earth* because in the Mass we participate in Our Lord's Sacred Passion for the world's salvation and because in the Mass we are one with Our Lord in His self-offering to the Father. When this mystery truly becomes the defining mystery of our own individual existence then the lust for power, advantage and glory have no appeal for us and we desire only the salvation of others; their well-being, both material and spiritual but above all spiritual *for what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself* (Lk. 9:25)?

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. This coming Saturday, February 20<sup>th</sup>, we will have a Parish Lenten Day of Reflection. We will celebrate our regular Saturday morning Mass at 9:00, serve a light breakfast in our Parish Hall, reflect on Our Lord's Passion and what we can learn from it and then together pray the Stations of the Cross. Our recollection as such an event is sometimes called, should be over by noon. If you have never attended the Stations of the Cross, this is an opportunity to be introduced to this beautiful and ancient devotion that helps us to understand how the Cross of Our Lord *exemplifies every virtue*. I encourage you to participate in this spiritual exercise, a short Lenten retreat for all of us.

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. *When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time* (Lk. 4:13). The devil's opportune time was Our Lord's Sacred Passion when the humility of Our Saviour overcame the pride of Satan; and His victory is our victory.