

What are you doing for Lent? What are you giving up this year? Don't answer. I never like those questions. In part because I think they emphasize *what* we are doing rather than *why* we are doing something. I used to hate it when people would ask me that *when* I was young... for a couple of reasons. First, this early in Lent I probably hadn't really decided yet. And secondly, if I had decided, I probably had already failed once or twice or just forgot about it altogether. Now there were times where I did make a choice and stuck to it and still missed the mark. I remember back in middle school I decided to give up my favorite refreshment. You see, my mother ran an establishment which, shall we say, required a mixing agent. There was always an open container of Coca-Cola nearby and, not surprisingly, it became my drink of choice. So, in that particular year I successfully (100% without fail), gave up Coke for Lent. Whenever I had a craving for Coke, I forced myself to drink something else. I chose... Mountain Dew. I really was quite ignorant of the fact that it was likely the caffeine I was so fond of nor did I know that Mountain Dew has even more caffeine than Coke. Imagine my surprise when Easter came and I could finally have that long-awaited Coke and it just didn't seem to have the same kick that it had before.

I wish you luck in whatever you choose for your Lenten practice. Feel free to learn from my mistake. But seriously, before we get too hung up on what specific acts of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving we work on, let's not lose sight of the vision or goal. Let's not miss the forest for the trees.

What are we trying to accomplish in these forty days? Where are we going with all this? Obviously, we are trying to change ourselves, but why? Where do we start? Well, the readings at the beginning of Lent, from both Ash Wednesday and today, give us a pretty big hint. It turns out it's best to start not with who we are or who we want to become, but instead, who we are not.

We are not God. Oh, we may have everything at our fingertips, more technology, more power, more knowledge than at any time in human history. Yet even with all that, our physical mortality wins out. We are only temporarily young, mentally sharp, and physically strong. But our biggest weakness may be our inability to live our lives as we ought to. For the most part, we all want to do the right thing, take the higher road, trust God, and be a faithful disciple. But we don't. We end up just like Adam and Eve. In fact, I think a lesson to be learned in the Genesis reading today is not that Eve and Adam should have known better, it's that if we are honest with ourselves, we would have made the same mistake back then and probably would do so again even now.

We are a lot like our first parents. When we walk out of the Sacrament of Reconciliation every few weeks or months, we are made as innocent and sinless as they were at the beginning. And yet over the course of a few weeks, days, or even hours, we end up listening to the lies whispered in our ears by a sinful culture, that *everything is OK if it feels good*, that *we won't get caught - everyone does it*, and *God couldn't really have meant that*, right? It was the same game played by the evil one in today's reading: don't trust God.

And then we conveniently forget who it was that created us, blessed us, redeemed us, and wants the absolute best for us. We instead conclude that the gain in power, pleasure, or wealth we get from evil will be our ticket to a heaven on earth. But it's not.

When our faith is weak, we fall to temptation and begin to lose hope. We feel like we are losing and evil is winning. But we must never forget who and what we are. Saint Pope John Paul II said, "*We are not the sum of our weaknesses and failures; we are the sum of the Father's love for us and our real capacity to become the image of his Son.*"

So how can we become strong enough to resist temptations? Our Gospel today shows us the one person who can resist and defeat the tempter is Jesus. We need His presence in our lives, through prayer, Holy Scripture, the Mass, and the sacraments, Eucharist & Reconciliation for sure, to have a fighting chance. The more we embrace Him in our lives, the better we will do. And if, or more likely, *when* we fail, He will be there to forgive us and help us up and out of the holes we dig ourselves into. Our goal is not what we might do this Lent, but to **become** who we really are: a beloved child of God. That's the reason for the sacrifices and all our various attempts at prayer, fasting, and almsgiving.

Our Lenten journey is, in part then, to get us back to where we were at our own baptism and then move forward from there. And one of the key moments at Easter will be making the six baptismal promises. We repeat them together whenever we baptize at Mass. We profess our belief in the three basic tenants of our faith, but first, we are asked, *do you reject Satan, all his works, and empty promises?* It's almost too easy, isn't it? Just rolls off

the tongue without much effort. Luckily for us, the new translation will use the old language style. “Do you *renounce* sin?” “Do you *renounce* the lure of evil?” “Do you *renounce* Satan, the author and prince of sin?” Isn’t that great? Renouncing is like rejecting with Chutzpah. It’s a little personal, isn’t it? This new language will appear in the baptism rite in a year or two, but we already use it in the Easter liturgy. Let’s make it a goal of ours to say it with conviction on Easter weekend. We’ve got another six weeks to work our way up to it. Let’s take advantage of reconciliation at some point this season to wipe the slate clean while we work on our individual Lenten practices to build up our faith, our discipline, and our resolve. We won’t be doing it alone; we’ll be doing it together. Plus, we have a young man at our parish, Austin, who will be building up his resolve to make those promises center stage at the Easter Vigil where he will receive all the sacraments of initiation. At the 10 AM Mass this weekend we will officially send our fine Catechumen (*Austin*) forth to the Bishop to be included as one of the Elect. Let’s pray for him, walk with him on his journey, and then in about fifty days, celebrate together his full acceptance into the Church.

I know Easter is a long way off. We’re just starting Lent, but let’s try to make this year count. If our goal in this life is to become the best possible version of ourselves (the Church would call that becoming holy), then we can’t just find ourselves back at same place every year. We need to try a little harder each year, to resolve to be the child of God we are called to be. If we can do that, then when we begin Lent next year, we can be just a little further than we are now, and the same for the year after that and so forth.

Let's work on our individual practices, try the same ones or different ones, whatever you think will work best for you. Don't worry if you struggle or miss the mark you set. We're all in this together and more importantly, Jesus is with us, every step of the way. Let us walk with Him, learn from Him, and stay united with Him through it all. It will be worth it.