

First Sunday of Lent: Forty Days towards the Eucharist

We begin Lent this week as we do every year with the gospel on the Temptation of the Lord. This Gospel is chosen by the Church because it begins with the 40 days of fasting of the Lord, followed by his being tempted by the devil.

40. 40 days of Lent. Today I want to begin with a brief reflection on the number 40 and then concentrate on the Paschal Gift, the Eucharist.

First of all, in the Bible 40 is always used to point out a period of time before a major event. Moses spent 40 days on Mt. Sinai before giving the people the Law of God. The Hebrew people spent 40 years in the desert before entering the Promised Land. Elijah spent 40 days journeying to Mt. Horeb to receive instructions from God appointing kings and his successor, Elisha. Jesus spent 40 days in the desert before beginning his earthly ministry. So, the number 40, be it in days or years denotes a time of preparation.

The 40 Days of Lent are a time of preparation. How we prepare, fasting, penance, prayer and charity, are all important as they lead to a greater understanding and celebration of what comes immediately after Lent, the Passion, Death and Resurrection of the Lord, the Easter Event. So, the preparation takes its meaning from its goal. Here's what I mean: it is easy for us to focus on our Lenten practices to such an extent that we overlook the goal of our fasting, prayer, penance and works of charity. The goal of Lent is the Paschal Event.

The Paschal Event begins with the Last Supper on that Thursday before the Lord died, Holy Thursday. We hear about it at every Mass. Jesus took bread and wine and said "This is my Body which will be given up for you," and "This is the chalice of my blood, the blood of the new and eternal covenant, which will be poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins." Holy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter Sunday are really various aspects of the Saving Event of the Lord. What was given to us on Holy Thursday foretold what would happen on Good Friday and resulted in the new life we share and celebrate on Easter Sunday.

What I find distressing, and perhaps you do too, is that some people walk away from the Gift of Holy Thursday, walk away from the Eucharist. Some people are going to other faiths that may or may not have a communion service, but certainly do not have the Gift of Holy Thursday, the Eucharist. The Eucharist is more than a communion service. It is the Real Presence of Jesus Christ. Only the Catholic (Roman and Byzantine) and Orthodox churches have tabernacles. Why? That is because we are the only Churches that believe that the bread is more than a symbol of our communion together and with the Lord. It is the Lord. Other faiths destroy the left over communion, we recognize that the consecrate hosts are the Eucharistic Presence of the Lord.

People who are Catholic and leave the Catholic Church are leaving the gift that

they have received. To leave the Church is to leave the Eucharist. People might say, "I don't want to be part of a Church that excludes people, like excluding women from the ordained priesthood or gays from a sacramental marriage." My response is always the same, "You are not just leaving the Roman Catholic Church. You are leaving the Eucharist."

Perhaps, the problem of people leaving the Eucharist was compounded by that horrible period of time when our Churches were closed due to the Corona Virus. Back then we did not know enough about the virus. People were dying. A lot of people were dying. There were no vaccines; so we shut down the country and the churches in the hope that the virus would run its course. We have vaccines now, and we know a lot more about the virus now, but back then all we knew was that we had to stay away from each other. If you remember, from mid March, 2020 until Pentecost, May 31, 2020, people could not go to Church, and as a result, could not receive communion. Yes, we had Masses online, and we still do live stream our Masses, but the people participating online were not and are not receiving communion. This all may have led to many people losing their understanding of the importance of receiving the Eucharist. Even those who are once more attending Church regularly, may be questioning the importance of receiving the Eucharist.

If the 40 days of Lent are to lead to a major event, the Easter Event, then I suggest that our focus on the Easter Event this year be on our sharing in the Body and Blood of Christ. Most of us receive the Eucharist every Sunday, some of us every day, but we still should focus this year on coming to a deeper understanding of what we are doing when we go to communion and Whom we are receiving. We need to affirm and strengthen our belief that when we are at Mass, we are at the Last Supper. When we receive communion, we are receiving the Lord offering up Himself for us on the Cross for our sins and the sins of all the world. When we receive communion particularly on Easter, we are celebrating the Presence of Jesus Christ within us, interceding with His Father for us, strengthening us to do battle with the Forces of evil, around us and within us.

What a gift we have been given! How could we even remotely consider walking away from this gift? There is a great incident in the life of Flannery O'Connor, a great Catholic Writer of the last century. She was only 39 years old when she died in 1964, but she had established a reputation as being an insightful portrayer of human nature and a strict defender of her Catholic Faith. The story goes that she was at a gathering of famous literary personages. She remained silent as the famous people expounded their thoughts. Then the discussion turned to the Catholic Church and the Holy Eucharist. One well-known writer commented that the Eucharist was a symbol, and a pretty good one at that. Flannery O'Connor stood up, and with a shaky voice, responded, "Well, if it's just a symbol, to hell with it!"

The Eucharist is not a symbol! It is Jesus Christ!

The Gospel readings for the First Sunday of Lent state the obvious, "The Lord

fasted for 40 days, and then was hungry.” During this Lent, we need to be hungry, hungry for the Eucharist. St. Teresa of Calcutta said that we should look at the crucifix and hear the Lord saying, “I did this for you.” In a similar way, when we get into the line for communion, or as we pray after we received communion, we need to listen to the Lord saying to each one of us, “I gave up my Body and Blood for you.” And we should thank God for admitting us into the great gift of the Eucharist.