

**ECHOING GOD'S WORD**  
**in**  
**THE CATHOLIC FAITH COMMUNITY**  
**First Sunday of Lent**  
**February 26, 2023**

**Lectionary Readings:**

Genesis 2:7-9; 3:1-7	The human race rebels against God.
Romans 5:12-19	Disobedience of Adam; Obedience of Christ.
Matthew 4:1-11	Jesus defines his mission through testing.

**Matthew:**

The Temptations of Jesus have been seen as having a very significant importance from the very earliest days of the Christian movement. All three Synoptic Gospels (Mark, Matthew and Luke) report the event. Mark has it all in two verses! The “Q” document used by Matthew and Luke spells out an interpretation of what was originally very much an inner experience of Jesus. There were no witnesses to this event. The way we find it described in Matthew and Luke is obviously meant as a model for the Christian community in its own “testing” or “process of self-definition.”

*Temptation* here means *testing*, in the sense of discovering one’s authentic role or mission in life. It is not a question of perhaps leading Jesus into sin. The Spirit wants to reveal to Jesus what his mission is in life and to reveal the same to us about Jesus and about ourselves. Truth is found in the elimination of falsehoods. Jesus rejects what he is not, in order to assert what he truly is.

Jesus is *Son of God*. This is not a revelation about the divinity of Christ. *Son of God* was the title given by God to Israel as a nation, as a people. It means “the nation that is intimate with God.” It came to be applied to the King in Israel, as the king represented the people before God and before the pagan nations. Jesus here is revealed as the Chosen One who will be given a new people, a new nation, bound to God in a New Covenant sealed in the blood of Jesus Christ. Matthew wants his community to know that they are the New Israel, born in Jesus Christ and consecrated in him to the glory of the Father. Jews and Greeks now share one family, one heritage, one identity before God. If Jesus is *Son of God*, then surely, we who belong to him share in that special relationship he has with the Father.

All three *Temptations* teach the same thing: Loving God is our highest destiny. It all comes back to a total love of God: ***With all your heart; With all your soul; With all your might.***

*Heart:* The ancients believed that the heart was where choices were made; that is where we decided between good and evil. To love God with one’s whole heart meant to have made an irrevocable commitment to choose good and to avoid evil.

*Soul:* The soul was symbolic of life. To have given one’s soul to God meant that one’s whole life now belonged to God and to God alone. To love God with the whole soul means that no part of my life has been withheld from God.

*Might:* Our might was our worldly goods, our material assets, our possessions, property and money. To love God with all our might means that we have consecrated our material goods also to the glory of God.

The threefold Temptation of Jesus has to do with his total dedication, his entire consecration of self to God. Nothing is withheld from God: decisions for good and not evil, his very life, all of his worldly goods if he has any.

The Church is called to redefine itself in the same way as Jesus, for the sake of clarifying its own mission in this world. Let there be no doubt who we belong to!

### **Genesis:**

The Jewish and Christian traditions have not been very successful in their dealing with this second chapter of the Book of Genesis, the so-called Second Account of Creation. It is not a second account of Creation at all. It is not about sin, death, sex, fall from grace, or any other such abstractions. It is an instruction, in story form, on how to live with those realities which are part of every person's existence. The *serpent* is not Satan or the Devil, or any other evil being. It is an image of the pagan gods taken from ancient literature. It is used to convey a warning against idolatry and infidelity. Religious teachings in story form do not translate very well into abstract discourse. This is a *story* and must remain such if it is not to lose its value and its real meaning.

### **Romans:**

Paul has one notion in mind: salvation comes through Jesus Christ alone. He reaches back into the Jewish tradition to assert that death came into the world because of one human, so life is restored to the world by one human: Jesus Christ the Lord. The doctrine of Paul is not that Adam really existed; it is simply a convenient image with which he can emphasize that the only one who can restore us to God is Jesus Christ. We must not construe anything else from this passage, such as, that Adam was the first man or that males only are responsible for the sin in the world.

## **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. Have you ever considered Lent as a time of “testing” or a time in which God asks us and the whole Church to clarify our sense of mission, to refocus on our duties, to define what we stand for? Who is Jesus Christ to you this season? What is the shape of your relationship with the Lord? Are you close? What are the steps by which you can become more intimate with Christ?

2. Have you chosen to love God with “all your *heart*?” [What choices do you make between good and evil?] Have you chosen to love God with “all your *soul*”? [Is your whole life given to God?] Have you chosen to love God with “all your *might*”? [Are some of your earthly goods consecrated to God?]

3. What penitential acts have you chosen for yourself for the season of Lent this year? How can you adapt the traditional practices of prayer, fasting and almsgiving to your concrete situation in life? How could you honor the spirit of fasting if you are not able to do the physical aspects of abstaining from food?

## **SUGGESTION FOR CHRISTIAN ACTION**

Ask a neighbor, a friend, a spouse, to help you evaluate the penitential practices that you have chosen for yourself this year. Ask that person to help you “test” your Lenten practices to see if they will help you define who you are as a Christian.

## PRAYER

**You are kind, God!  
Please have pity on me.  
You are always merciful!  
Please wipe away my sins.  
Wash me clean from all of my sin and guilt.  
Offerings and sacrifices are not what you want.  
The way to please you is to feel sorrow deep in our hearts.  
This is the kind of sacrifice you will not refuse.**  
(Psalm 51: 1-2, 16-17)

## CATHOLIC DOCTRINE

The Catholic tradition concerning the season of Lent developed and underwent frequent modifications over a long period of time. From very early times, the community observed at least two days of fasting just before Easter. In the fourth century of Christianity, catechumens were put through an intense period of final preparation for their initiation at the Easter Vigil. Eventually, that period was extended to the 40 days before the Triduum (The Three Days: Holy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday). During those 40 days, special practices of prayer, of fasting and of almsgiving were exercised. After several years of instruction, with periodic rituals of blessings and intercessions, the catechumens were led to the Easter sacraments through a succession of Sundays when the community prayed for them, and through six weeks of modified fasting, with a special emphasis on works of charity, especially toward the poor. Lent was for catechumens especially.

Of course, the rest of the faithful walked with them through these stages and these penitential practices. At first, the community did this to give good example, to provide support, and to offer the assistance of their prayers to the catechumens. With time, the faithful themselves began to realize that Lent did them good also. As they fasted from food and drink, and sometimes even from the Eucharist in anticipation of Holy Thursday, the community of faith developed a heightened awareness of their hunger for the Bread of Life, a renewal of their appreciation for the waters of baptism, a new yearning for a deeper anointing from the Holy Spirit. Lent became their time of renewal as they journeyed with the catechumens. The whole Church became renewed. The Spirit of Jesus Christ was poured out on the whole assembly.

After more centuries had passed, Lent became more and more a time for individual and personal introspection, of self-scrutiny, and of private practices of penance, even of extreme austerity, as more attention was paid to the sinfulness of the person rather than the community's call to holiness. We sort of lost sight of the renewal of the Church and focused more and more on personal and individual renewal.

The Second Vatican Council called for a recovery of the communal dimensions of the Lenten season. The Church wants us to see Lent as a time for parishes to become prepared for Easter. It is all in view of the resurrection of Christ and of the re-enlivening of the Church at Pentecost. Lent is not for its own sake. The focus is on *ashes* and *water*: Repentance, Accepting the Gospel, New Life.

(See **The Catechism: # 1168-1171**)

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