Learning from Jesus’ Temptations

By Fr. Mark Haydu

Every Lent, priests, nuns, monks, and many laypeople pray the following: “Be sober and vigilant. Your opponent the devil is prowling around like a roaring lion looking for [someone] to devour” (1 Peter 5:8). Jesus encountered this truth in his temptations in the desert, another place in his ministry where he experienced the struggle of humanity.

The temptations begin, “If you are the Son of God...” All our temptations begin by doubting and challenging Jesus to prove himself. Although Jesus is all-powerful and all-good, we struggle to make sense of suffering and tragedies.

The temptations continue as Jesus is invited to satisfy himself, impress others, and skip suffering. But Jesus responds repeatedly in humility. In the desert he doesn’t turn stones into bread. He later does something far greater; he turns bread and wine into himself. When tempted, we cry out to him to soften the hard realities of our lives. And Jesus does just that. He suffers in his passion, dies, and rises again to become life-giving bread for us. He becomes manna in our desert.

When we wish for power, Jesus promises we will reign with him if we also let him suffer for us and we with him. The devil would have us take matters into our own hands, doubt God, and make him prove himself by our measures. Yet if we listen to Jesus, look at his answers, and learn from his life, then true power will be ours. +

A Word from Pope Francis

Fasting makes us share the situation of many people who face the torment of hunger and makes us more attentive to others; almsgiving is a blessed opportunity to collaborate with God’s providence for the benefit of his children.

—Address to Pro Petri Sede Association, February 16, 2018

Sunday Readings

Deuteronomy 26:4–10
Then the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a strong hand and outstretched arm, with terrifying power, with signs and wonders.

Romans 10:8–13
There is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all, enriching all who call upon him.

When the devil had finished every temptation, he departed from him for a time.

All our temptations begin by doubting and challenging Jesus to prove himself.

Reflection Questions

• What makes me question God the most?
• How can God’s word and Jesus’ passion, death, and resurrection respond to that doubt?
Signed, Sealed, Delivered

By Fr. Byron Miller, CSsR

A
n illustrated Catholic Guide to Ashes by Bill Donaghy comically identifies the different shapes and sizes of the dark smudge we receive on our foreheads at the beginning of Lent. Examples include a neatly formed ashen cross as “First in Line,” an amorphous spot as “The Blob,” and an oversized, heavily stroked cross as “Father’s Revenge.”

While ministering in New Orleans, I observed people on Ash Wednesday bearing on their foreheads what may be mistaken for a flattened palmetto bug. However, I wouldn’t attribute this splotch to “Father’s Revenge” but to the aftermath of “Father’s Revelry” on Mardi Gras the day before! (I speak indulgently from experience.)

In 1949, British author Evelyn Waugh had his own observations about New Orleans: “Ash Wednesday: warm rain falling in streets unsightly with the draggled survivals of carnival. The Roosevelt Hotel overflowing with crapulous tourists planning their return journeys….But across the way the Jesuit Church was teeming with life all day long; a continuous, dense crowd of all colors and conditions moving up to the altar rails and returning with their foreheads signed with ash….All that day, all over the lighthearted city, one encountered the little black smudge on the forehead which sealed us members of a great brotherhood who can both rejoice and recognize the limits of rejoicing” (Life magazine).

Lent is the penitential season to rejoice within limits: “For you are dust, and to dust you shall return” (Genesis 3:19). We recognize our short lifespans and limitations, but we rejoice assuredly that the dust to which we shall one day return is glorified in Christ without limit! “The cross, with which the ashes are traced upon us, is the sign of Christ’s victory over death….It might be good stoicism to receive a mere reminder of our condemnation to die, but it is not Christianity” (from Ash Wednesday: Spiritual Medicine by Thomas Merton).

Thus, ashes are both a sign of mortality and purification in Christ. Before the charred remnants of last year’s palms take fuzzy form on our foreheads, the holy chrism oil first marked the spot at our baptism! “The person baptized is configured to Christ. Baptism seals the Christian with the indelible spiritual mark…of his belonging to Christ” (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1272). Moreover, “The faithful Christian who has ’kept this seal until the end, remaining faithful to the demands of his Baptism, will be able to depart this life ‘marked with the sign of faith’…in expectation of the blessed vision of God…and in the hope of the resurrection” (CCC 1274).

So, if the cross is a little disfigured on our foreheads on Ash Wednesday, let its distortion represent a desire to reconfigure ourselves to Christ in Lent. Now’s the time to give alms, do penance, and amend our lives! +

We recognize our short lifespans and limitations, but we rejoice assuredly that the dust to which we shall one day return is glorified in Christ without limit!

PRAYER

Lord, give me the courage to accept the painful, ugly realities of life and become your advocate of truth and justice in the world.

—From Mindful Meditations for Every Day of Lent and Easter, Rev. Warren J. Savage and Mary Ann McSweezy

WEEKDAY READINGS

March 7–12

| Monday, Lenten Weekday: Lv 19:1–2, 11–18 / Mt 25:31–46 |
| Tuesday, Lenten Weekday: Is 55:10–11 / Mt 6:7–15 |
| Wednesday, Lenten Weekday: Jon 3:1–10 / Lk 11:29–32 |
| Thursday, Lenten Weekday: Est C:12, 14–16, 23–25 / Mt 7:7–12 |
| Friday, Lenten Weekday: Ez 18:21–28 / Mt 5:20–26 |
| Saturday, Lenten Weekday: Dt 26:16–19 / Mt 5:43–48 |

March 6, 2022

Transfiguring Our Lives through Christ

By Fr. Mark Haydu

The same three apostles who are present in the Garden of Gethsemane are also at the transfiguration. On both occasions they fall asleep! But when they awake at the transfiguration, they see something totally different. They see Jesus radiant and resplendent like they had never seen him before. This revelation of his glory is meant to strengthen their faith and prepare them for seeing Jesus later, sweating blood in the agony of the Garden. Experiencing the joy and beauty of Jesus is essential to persevering through the inevitable passions we will have to undergo. Faith is not all about suffering, but about joy, love, and intimacy with Christ. Yes, love sometimes means we must suffer, but the fruit is greater intimacy. A diamond is made under great pressure and love must pass through temptations.

All three synoptic Gospels unite the transfiguration with Peter's profession of faith. The reality of the passion and cross should not shake the apostle's faith, but they should realize that his exaltation can only be accomplished in the cross: “And when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to myself” (John 12:32).

The sufferings we see in the world, in our own past and present, shouldn't shake our faith in Jesus, either. Overcoming sin comes from embracing suffering.

Jesus is so radiant that he awakes the apostles from their slumber. May the consuming love with which we burn for Jesus transfigure us into beautiful lights that awaken this world from its slumber of faith as well. +

Experiencing the joy and beauty of Jesus is essential to persevering through the passions we must undergo.

Sunday Readings

Genesis 15:5–12, 17–18
The LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying: To your descendants I give this land.

Philippians 3:17—4:1
or 3:20—4:1
Our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we also await a savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.

While he was praying his face changed in appearance and his clothing became dazzling white.

A Word from Pope Francis

Belief in God and the worship of God are not enough to ensure that we are actually living in a way pleasing to God. A believer may be untrue to everything that his faith demands of him, and yet think he is close to God and better than others.

—On Fraternity and Social Friendship (Fratelli Tutti), October 3, 2020

Reflection Questions

• What area of your life does Jesus want to transfigure into a brighter testimony for him?
• Light comes from energy consumed and transformed. How does that truth apply to your spiritual life?
An Unexpected Awakening

By Barbara Hughes

I’m not sure what I expected, but as I crossed the threshold, the room with its cement floor, cinder-block walls, and two small windows placed near the ceiling caused me to question my sanity. What in the world was I doing here? In lieu of a bed, a hammock hung from the ceiling in one corner of the room, and in another was a straight-back chair facing a shell-like table that held a wooden cross fashioned from tree branches. There was no electricity, but there was running water, evidenced by the small sink and toilet tucked behind a half-wall that partially divided the space. This was my first trip to the hermitage hidden deep in the woods on the grounds of a Benedictine monastery. I had decided spending time in a hermitage would be a meaningful, delightful way to begin the season of Lent. Now I wasn’t so sure.

But as I looked around the room, I realized the bare-bones environment was intentional. There was nothing pleasant to look at, nothing to distract me. I could no longer run from God or hide behind work or family commitments. With nothing else to do, I took a deep breath, closed my eyes, and let the world around me disappear.

A cocoon-like silence enveloped me, and as my heart began to swell, I knew I stood on holy ground. In the hours and days that followed, I discovered that it wasn’t the hermitage I was visiting but the hermitage that God was building inside me that was pure, a place I could carry with me long after I left the monastery grounds. This unexpected awakening gave me a new perspective, which, in essence, is what Lent is all about.

The word Lent means “lengthening of days.” It reminds us we have time to turn away from sin and fall in love with God. We begin by stripping away excuses for our sins and shortcomings. We strive to shed illusions rooted in the false self and enter the desert with Jesus, where we are given the opportunity to discover what can only be learned through prayer, fasting, and almsgiving.

Each year, the Church invites us to enter the desert, because once is never enough. Despite our best intentions, we grow weary, our resolve dissipates, and our baptismal robe becomes soiled. Hence, the penitential tone of Lent invites us to fast not only from food but also from sin and all that may lead us astray. We recognize that we can’t do this by ourselves and so we profess our weakness and ask God to create a clean heart in us and renew our commitment to practice good works.

Lent is serious business, but serious is not the same as gloomy. In fact, Lent can be a time of joyful consolation because the more we empty ourselves, the more God fills us with his mercy and grace. This is the good news with which we are called to begin our Lenten journey, because, according to St. Paul in 2 Corinthians 6:2, God affirms, “In an acceptable time I heard you, and on the day of salvation I helped you.”

During Lent, we strive to shed illusions rooted in the false self and enter the desert with Jesus.

Lord, you desire to be with me and walk with me along life’s journey. Awaken in my heart a desire and commitment to be with you in prayer.

—From Mindful Meditations for Every Day of Lent and Easter, Rev. Warren J. Savage and Mary Ann McSweeney
Appreciating God’s Patience

By Fr. Mark Haydu, LC

God is very patient, but his patience doesn’t last forever.

In the Old Testament, after God spoke to Abraham and Lot’s subsequent rebellion, some 500 years passed before God revealed himself again—this time to Moses. God takes the first step toward Abraham and, when his descendants turned away, he steps back. He reached out again to Moses and revealed his name so that Moses could enter into a personal relationship with him and explain his name to others. God wants to be known by his people and by you!

So here we learn that with this revelation of God comes a responsibility. He unveils his mysterious face, but he also desires a loving response and for us to witness about him to others.

Saint Paul makes it clear that God eventually ran out of patience with the Chosen People in the desert. After freeing the Israelites from Egypt with signs and wonders, giving them his law, and feeding them in the desert, they complained against him. Like the fig tree in the Gospel, he gave them ample time and multiple encores of his love and mercy. Yet eventually, his love took the form of tough love—forty years of desert wanderings.

Lent is another expression of God’s patience toward us. He is once again sowing the seeds of conversion, hoping for the fruits of our change of heart—fruits of love, forgiveness, repentance, and renewal.

He gives time for his cultivating efforts to take effect and for fruit to appear, but our life on earth is finite, so that time isn’t unlimited.

God wants to be known by his people and by you!

A Word from Pope Francis

Fasting, prayer and almsgiving...express our conversion. The path of poverty and self-denial (fasting), concern and loving care for the poor (almsgiving), and childlike dialogue with the Father (prayer) make it possible for us to live lives of sincere faith, living hope, and effective charity.

—Lenten message for 2021, November 11, 2020

Sunday Readings

Exodus 3:1–8a, 13–15

God replied to Moses: I am who I am.... This is what you will tell the Israelites: I AM has sent me to you.

1 Corinthians 10:1–6, 10–12

Whoever thinks he is standing secure should take care not to fall.


“Sir, leave it for this year also, and I shall cultivate the ground around it and fertilize it; it may bear fruit in the future.”

• Is there a particular way I “desire evil things,” as in the second reading?

• God shows me patience and mercy yet again this year. How shall I respond?
A Glorious Celebration!

By Fr. Bruce Lewandowski, CSsR

Ask most Catholics about Lent and they’ll tell you it lasts forty days. It starts on Ash Wednesday. They’ll tell you it’s a time to intensify our prayer, fasting, and good works. Some will say it’s a time for repentance and reconciliation. There’s no meat on Fridays, so the local Knights of Columbus fish fry is popular. It’s the time allotted to prepare for Easter. It’s about sacrifice….Lent is certainly about all of this, but there’s something more, especially when it comes to the RCIA.

Looking for a different take on Lent? Tune in to your parish’s RCIA program. In 1972, with the promulgation of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, Lent was resituated in the context of the catechumenal process, reconnecting it to the hard work of getting ready to accept the faith and learning to live it well. Catechumens and candidates journey through a process that embodies catechesis and accompaniment, preparation for the Easter sacraments and encouragement for living daily the mysteries of our Catholic faith.

This Lent, pay attention to and take part in the experience of three moments that are integral to the process of becoming a Catholic Christian through the RCIA: election, scrutinies, and the reception of sacraments. Long before the first Sunday of Lent and the rite of election, the catechumens have been preparing, studying, sharing, and living the faith they long to fully embrace. They have undergone a conversion and have a clear understanding of what it means to be a follower of Christ. So, they are invited to present their names for enrollment and are called to the Easter sacraments by the local ordinary. It’s a dramatic moment that takes place at a cathedral or other convenient location. At the rite of election, we witness the power of God’s action in people’s lives as so many come forward for enrollment. The catechumens are now called elect. The three Sundays of Lent set aside for the scrutinies call the elect to deeper conversion. At a parish Mass, with Scripture reflections on the Samaritan woman, the man born blind, and Lazarus as the backdrop, the elect are invited to experience what it means to be delivered from sin and its effects.

Washed in baptism, anointed in confirmation, and fed in Eucharist, all in the paschal light of the Easter Vigil, the elect become members of God’s family in the Church. This is one of the most glorious celebrations within the Church!

Talk with your pastor or parish’s RCIA/faith formation coordinator to find out when these events will take place and how you might prepare for and participate in them. Spending the forty days of Lent with your parish’s RCIA members who are on the path to become purified and sanctified can be life-changing, for them and for you. +

One way to grow in faith during these forty days is to take part in your parish’s RCIA process.

Lord, you are patient with me and never withhold your love and mercy from me. Strengthen me with your grace to become fully human, fully alive in the world.

—From Mindful Meditations for Every Day of Lent and Easter, Rev. Warren J. Savage and Mary Ann McSweeney

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March 20–26
Living, Loving in the Here and Now

By Fr. Mark Haydu, LC

It is good that we are here—joined in community for Sunday worship, here, in this moment of prayer.

Our lives are so hectic and fast-paced that it’s often hard to enjoy just being in the present moment with God. It’s not just the pressure of work, but the added responsibilities of home. You know the routine...getting the kids to school; getting to work on time; leaving from work; running a few errands; preparing dinner; going back out to pick up the kids from practice; then back home for dinner, dishes, laundry, homework; and then finally to bed on time so you can get up early and start again.

But just stop! Take the time to enjoy the grace of the Eucharist, to rejoice in one another and savor Christ who reveals his love to you. Give yourself this gift. Each moment has power, poetry, and grace. Each instant is a gift from God, and each moment is an opportunity to encounter Jesus Christ. It’s an occasion to return within ourselves and turn back to our Father who is eagerly waiting for us.

It’s good to be here—not somewhere else, not in another time when we were happier, healthier, or life was easier and simpler. Right here, right now, right where God has you is where he is revealing his love. It may not be easy, but this is where God is, and it’s good to reflect on the graces each moment presents. +

Sunday Readings

Joshua 5:9a, 10–12
No longer was there manna for the Israelites, who that year ate of the yield of the land of Canaan.

2 Corinthians 5:17–21
Whoever is in Christ is a new creation: the old things have passed away; behold, new things have come.

[Jesus said,] “Now we must celebrate and rejoice, because your brother was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.”

Right here, right now, right where God has you is where he is revealing his love.

A Word from Pope Francis

Prayer often coexists with distraction...We all experience this constant whirlwind of images and illusions in perpetual motion, which accompanies us even during sleep. And we all know that it is not good to follow this inclination toward disorder.

—General audience, May 19, 2021

Reflection Questions

- Can I let go of the past and set aside worries of the future to find God in the only place he can be found—in the present moment?
- If not, how about asking Christ for that grace today?
What’s the Point of Lenten Sacrifices?

By Emily Blasik

“Lent comes providentially to reawaken us, to shake us from our lethargy.”
—Pope Francis

Confession time. In my twenty-six years of living, I have never, ever been able to successfully give up something I love for the entirety of Lent. No matter what I choose to forego in any given year for the sake of sacrifice—whether it’s caffeine, chocolate, or even cursing (habits die hard, y’all)—by the end of the second week, I’m back at it with a vengeance. Sacrifice obviously isn’t my strong suit.

Despite my past weaknesses, each Ash Wednesday I feel a renewed sense of motivation and good intention. I’m going to do it right this year, I tell myself as I stand in line to receive my ashes. Time and time again, I make a solemn vow to refrain from whatever it is that’s on my heart, hoping that my small amount of self-induced “suffering” will somehow bring me closer to Christ. And time and time again, I cave before the season ends. Cue an extra layer of guilt.

This year, however, I’m doing something different. I’m looking inward and asking myself why it’s important to make sacrifices for the Lord in the first place. Are random sacrifices for sacrifice’s sake really going to strengthen my faith or make me a better person? Perhaps. Discipline is a virtue, no doubt, and an underrated one at that. But when it comes to accomplishing anything, I’m the type of person who needs to see value in the Big Picture in order to follow through. I need to have a why: a purpose for my actions, a reason to keep going when the going gets tough.

Finally, after much prayer and contemplation this time around, I’ve figured out my big why—and it doesn’t have anything to do with proving myself as a devout Catholic who deserves God’s love. God doesn’t care if I can resist chocolate or coffee for forty days. He truly cares about my eternal salvation—whether I’m choosing to place my time, faith, and trust in him...or something else entirely.

It can be easy to let God fade into the background while we “worship” material goods, attach ourselves to worldly joys, and find comfort and solace in lesser things. But Lent reminds us that we still need a Savior, and despite what the devil will have us believe, our Savior, Jesus Christ, is all we need.

God doesn’t care if I can resist chocolate or coffee for forty days. He truly cares about my eternal salvation.

PRAYER

Lord, you are the face of God's compassion in the world. Give me a compassionate heart to embrace my suffering brothers and sisters.

—From Mindful Meditations for Every Day of Lent and Easter, Rev. Warren J. Savage and Mary Ann McSweeney

WEEKDAY READINGS

March 28–April 2

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