

FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT (YEAR B)

February 21, 2021

Genesis 9:8–15 • 1 Peter 3:18–22 • Mark 1:12–15

I.

Over the last two weeks,
I've been meeting with those in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, or RCIA.

These are persons who are discerning and preparing to receive
one or more of the Sacraments of Christian Initiation:
Baptism, Confirmation, and the Eucharist.

The RCIA includes three categories:

1. Unbaptized persons;
2. Persons baptized in another Christian denomination who wish to become Catholics—this is called “reception into the full communion of the Catholic Church”;
3. And Catholics who were baptized as infants but who were never catechized or instructed in the faith

Earlier today,
several catechumens or candidates for adult baptism
participated in the Rite of Election,
whereby they officially submitted their names to Bp. Knestout
for the Easter sacraments.

It's been edifying for me to meet participants in RCIA
and to see their witness of faith,
a faith that has led them to the Catholic Church,
and a faith that is growing stronger as they prepare to receive the sacraments.

Faith is their response to God's grace or action in their lives;
it's a decision to follow God more closely.

Their decision illustrates the choice that, for most of us,
our parents and godparents made for us:
to have us baptized,
and to prepare us for Penance, First Holy Communion, and Confirmation.

Since then,
we have chosen to practice our faith in hope of attaining eternal life.

Those sacraments we receive already bring about our communion with God,
and, in that way, they are a foretaste of heaven.

The sacraments help us grow in holiness as continue the pilgrimage to heaven.

II.

Everyone is here because of a decision to follow God.

On this First Sunday of Lent,
the focus turns to that basic decision:
to follow God in response to grace,
or to follow the Devil and succumb to the power of sin.

Today, on the First Sunday of Lent,
the Church hears the account of Jesus' temptations,
which immediately follow his baptism and which precede his public ministry:

“The Spirit drove Jesus out into the desert,
he remained in the desert for forty days,
tempted by Satan.”

Temptation—the possibility of sinning—is not the same as committing a sin,
which is to disobey God.

The Son of God undergoes temptation as part of his Incarnation,
but he never sins.

That's part of his mission:
to reverse our disobedience by means of his obedience.

As you'll hear in today's Preface to the Eucharistic Prayer,

“By abstaining forty long days from earthly food,
 he consecrated through his fast
 the pattern of our Lenten observance
 and, by overturning all the snares of the ancient serpent,
 taught us to cast out the leaven of malice.”

The temptations of Jesus prepare for the renewal of the human race
 that he will accomplish by his passion, death, and resurrection.

The First Reading expresses that reality by means of the 40-day flood.

In the Book of Genesis,
 the flood brings about a cleansing from sin:
 God’s re-creation of the world.

Thanks to Christ, God is constantly renewing the world,
 and renewing our lives.

That is the power of Baptism,
 of confessing our sins in the Sacrament of Penance,
 of participating devoutly in Mass,
 and of receiving Holy Communion.

Sin remains, but it doesn’t have to rule over our lives.

This is why the Church asks us, when we are baptized,
 and when we renew our baptismal promises:

“Do you renounce the lure of evil,
 so that sin may have no mastery over you?”

Whereas the Protestant theological position has stressed that man is totally
 depraved because of original sin, and is incapable of choosing good,
 the Catholic Church has disagreed.

Human freedom has certainly been injured by original sin,
 but we are capable, assisted by God’s grace, in choosing what is right and good.

A temptation is as much an opportunity for growing closer to God
 as it is an occasion for sin.

Our choices matter; they make us who we are.

So, an encouragement for Holy Lent:
make good choices, in order to draw closer to God.

I offer some concrete recommendations:

1. Choose to confess your sins in the Sacrament of Penance.

Confessions are heard on Wednesdays at 5:30 p.m., and, during Lent, on Fridays at 6:00 p.m.

2. Choose to pray the Stations of the Cross on the Fridays of Lent—we had a fantastic turnout for the Stations of the Cross this past Friday.
3. The parish theme for February is the Corporal Works of Mercy.

The parish staff has put together a fantastic clickable PDF that explains each work of mercy, and has a specific, feasible suggestion for accomplishing it.

Choose to carry out the Corporal Works of Mercy.

4. Choose to encourage someone you know to return to public Mass, without browbeating or guilt-tripping, always respecting his or her conscience and life circumstances.

III.

“Lead us not into temptation.”

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains that this petition means both,

“‘Do not allow us to enter into temptation’
and ‘do not let us yield to temptation.’

‘God cannot be tempted by evil and he himself tempts no one’;
on the contrary, he wants to set us free from evil.

We ask him not to allow us to take the way that leads to sin” (no. 2846).

Christ has gone before us in temptation, and his roundly defeated the Enemy.

He empowers us: to reject sin and to live supremely for God.