

Understanding Lent

Although the celebration of Lent began in the Catholic Church, it is not exclusively a Catholic practice. For example, it is common for Methodists, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Orthodox, Lutherans and others to celebrate Lent in some form. The word "lent" was originally a Teutonic word that meant the spring season. During the Anglo-Saxon era it was the term used to translate the Latin word *quadagesima*, meaning the "forty days," or more literally the "fortieth day."

During the first three centuries of the Christian era there were great variances in the fasting observance before Easter. Writing to Pope Victor near the end of the second century, St. Irenaeus observed: "some think they ought to fast for one day, others for two days, and others even for several, while others reckon forty hours both of day and night to their fast."

In his *Festal Letters* (331 A.D.) St. Athanasius instructed his flock to fast for forty days preliminary to, but not inclusive of, the stricter fast of Holy Week. Subsequently, in 339 he wrote in the strongest terms to urge this observance upon the people of Alexandria because the forty days fast was universally practiced.

In the time of Pope Gregory the Great (590-604) the fasting at Rome during Lent lasted six days excluding Sunday during the six weeks before Easter, making thirty-six fast days in all. At a later date the wish to realize the exact number of forty days led to the present practice of beginning Lent on Ash Wednesday. To understand the season of Lent we need to start with the creation accounts in the Book of Genesis.

Before the Fall

Genesis 1:26

"Then God said: 'Let us make man [humans] in our image, after our likeness.'" [Genesis is describing the creation of God's human son and daughter.] "Let *them* have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and the cattle and over all the wild animals and all the creatures that crawl on the ground." [Notice they are given rule or dominion over the rest of creation. Adam and Eve are a king and queen.]

Genesis 1:27

"God created man in His image; in the divine image he created him: *male* and *female* he created them." [This important verse emphasizes that Adam and Eve are God's son and daughter, but it adds another important insight. God also created human sexuality. The Bible is very sexual in that it honors human sexuality as: special, sacred, and holy - never just good. These important ideas are repeated in the next verse.]

Genesis 1: 28, 31

"God blessed them, saying to them: 'Be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it'." The passage concludes with the words: "God looked at everything he had made, and he found it very good."

The creation account is repeated in chapter two, but with a different emphasis. Chapter one focuses on God's creative power. Chapter two focuses on God's unique relationship with his favorite creature, humans.

Adam

When God created Adam, He is viewed as a master potter forming Adam from clay: "The Lord God formed man out of the clay of the ground [*adama*, from which we get the word Adam] and blew into his nostrils the breath [*ruah* - which means breath, wind or spirit] of life [human and divine life], and so man became a living being ["living" in every sense of the word]" (Gen 2:7). There is a Jewish tradition that the dust which God formed Adam was taken from the ground upon which the Temple would eventually stand. Another tradition stated that Adam composed a song on the day of his creation, which has been preserved as Psalm 92.

Eve

In Eve's creation account, God is portrayed as an architect creating His masterwork:

"So the Lord God cast a deep sleep on the man, and while he was asleep, he took out one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. The Lord God then built up into a woman the rib that he had taken from the man. When he brought her to the man, the man said: 'This one, at last, is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh [that is, she has my nature]; this one shall be called *woman* for out of *her man* this one has been taken'" (Gen 2:21-23).

The "deep sleep" depicts a sleep almost like death. If Eve were formed from a bone in Adam's head, it would signify she was superior to him. If she were formed from a bone in Adam's foot, it would indicate she was inferior to him. But the rib is near the heart. It both addresses the equality of their relationship and the love that should bind them. The bride of the new Adam, Jesus Christ (1 Cor 15:45), was formed from the side of Christ when He hung in the sleep of death on the cross with blood and water flowing from His heart signifying the two sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist.

The Relationship

Genesis 2:24-25

"That is why a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and the two of them become one body."

Jesus cited this passage when He affirmed the indissolubility of marriage and rejected divorce (Mt 19:5).

"The man [Adam] and his wife [Eve] were both naked, yet they *felt no shame.*"

The absence of shame is the key part of this verse that Pope John Paul II highlighted in his magnificent theology of the body. Shame is the proper defensive reaction when nakedness is a threat to one's dignity as a person.

In their original innocence Adam and Eve desired to love each other as God loves, that is, with total self-giving and without exploitation. They viewed the other's nude body as an external revelation of the person that possessed a great dignity. The object of their heart was the precious person within the body, not an object to be selfishly used. They were totally unguarded in each other's presence because each one respected and protected the dignity of

the other. There is no shame in loving the way God loves, because their focus was not on a body to be used, but on the person to be loved that radiated through the body.

Let's summarize some of the points discussed above by citing the *Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)*:

CCC # 375 – “Adam and Eve were constituted in an original ‘state of holiness and justice’. This grace of original holiness was ‘to share in. . . divine life’.”

CCC # 376 – “By the radiance of this grace all dimensions of man's life were confirmed. As long as he remained in the divine intimacy, man would not have to suffer or die. The [1] inner harmony of the human person, [2] the harmony between man and woman, and [3] finally the harmony between the first couple and all creation, comprised the state called ‘original justice’.”

CCC # 377 – “The ‘mastery’ over the world that God offered man from the beginning was realized above all within man himself: *mastery of self*. The first man was unimpaired and ordered in his whole being because he was free from the triple concupiscence that subjugates him to the [1] pleasures of the senses, [2] covetousness for earthly goods, and [3] self-assertion, contrary to the dictates of reason.” These three aspects of concupiscence will be discussed later.

We all know what happened. It's called the Fall. The *Catechism* summarizes it this way: “This entire harmony of original justice, foreseen for man in God's plan, will be lost by the sin of our first parents” (**CCC # 379**). However, before we examine the Fall in chapter 3 of Genesis, we need to examine the vocation of our first parents.

Adam was called to be a priest, a prophet, and a king. As a **priest**, he was called to be a conduit and protector of *life*. He was a conduit of life as a biological and spiritual father. God commanded Adam to “cultivate” and “care” for the Garden of Eden (Gen 2:15) just before He gave Adam the command not to eat of “the tree of knowledge of good and evil” (Gen 2:17). The translation “care” is a weak rendering of the Hebrew word *shamar*, which means to “guard” or “defend.” This command conveys two ideas. First, it indicates the existence of an external threat. Second, it implies there is something in Eden that is valuable. In the context of God's command and the aftermath, it is clear that Adam's soul and the soul of his bride were the precious objects that needed defending.

As a **prophet**, Adam was called to be a conduit of *truth*. He was charged with communicating God's command to Eve. Finally, as a **king**, Adam was called to lovingly *serve* his wife and their future children. He would accomplish this through the cultivation of natural creation and as the spiritual leader of his family.

Eve complimented Adam in her three-fold office as mother, prophetess, and queen. As the biological **mother** of the living, Eve was uniquely a conduit of *life*. Indeed, women cooperate with God in the creation of human life that far transcends the role of men. As a **prophetess**, Eve shared in the spiritual formation of her children for she was also called to be a conduit of *truth*. Also as the one loved, the heart of the family, Eve was called to model *how men and women respond faithfully to God*, the heavenly husband. Finally, as a **queen**, Eve was called to

a life of *service*, and to assist her husband as the spiritual leader in the family.

The Fall

Everything changed with the Fall.

“Now the serpent was the most cunning of all the animals that the Lord God had made. The serpent asked the woman, ‘Did God *really* tell you to eat from *any* of the trees in the garden?’ The woman answered the serpent: “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; it is only about the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden that God said, ‘You shall not eat of it or even touch it, lest you die’ [She’s exaggerating God’s command. Did Adam give her clear information?]. But the serpent said to the woman: “You certainly will not die [He both lies and contradicts God.]! No, God knows well that the moment you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like gods who know what is good and what is bad” (Gen 3:4-5).

This is the critical point in the temptation because the devil questioned the heavenly Father’s love. He was saying in effect: “God does not love you. He is holding back the gift of love and life because he is selfishly trying to protect his privileged position. He knows that when you eat of the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil, you will be like him making your own rules. Then you will determine what is right and wrong. Don’t trust God. So, if you want to be free, be like me and take it.”

Tragically, the guard Adam was silent. When the devil questioned the Father’s love and integrity, Adam should have spoken out: “Hallowed be His name.” When they were tempted to set up a reign in opposition to God, he should have proclaimed: “His kingdom come, and His will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” When the devil tried to seduce Eve to deny God’s gift of life and love, Adam should have asserted: “The good Father will give us our daily bread, we don’t have to take it.” Finally, in his confrontation with the anti-Word, Adam should have cried out to the Father: “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.” The Lord’s Prayer is not merely a beautiful prayer that Jesus taught, but a synopsis of the life He lived. No wonder the *Catechism* calls it “the summary of the whole gospel” (CCC # 2700).

Because there was no challenge to the devil’s beguiling lies, Eve’s focus was fixed on the deception. The Bible simply tells us:

“The woman saw that the tree was:

“good for food,” that is, capable of giving **pleasure**,
“pleasing to the eyes,” therefore, alluring to **possess**, and
“desirable for gaining wisdom,” that is, enticing to give **power**,
“So she took some of its fruit and ate it” (Gen 2:6).

Eve didn’t bite into an apple; she bit into the lie that she could short-cut the road to happiness by doing things *her* way, according to *her* ideas. This is a deception that many, many bite into today. Notice what captivated her imagination: pleasure, possessions, and power. Perhaps these enticements to sin are more familiar to you by other names: power, sex, and money - or as expressed in the *Catechism* # 3771: “pleasures of the senses,” “covetousness for earthly goods,” and excessive “self-assertion”!

St. John addressed these alluring dangers in his first letter:

“Do not love the world or the things of the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, [1] *sensual lust*, [2] *enticement for the eyes*, and a [3] *pretentious life*, is not from the Father but from the world” (1 Jn 2:15-16).

Other translations render the key words as: “*lust of the eyes, lust of the flesh, and the pride of life.*”

Lust indicates desires that are misdirected and disordered. Power, sex, and money are good in themselves, but the inordinate desire for power, sex, and money is evil. Centering one’s life on success, wealth, career and workaholicism, for example, are all forms of idolatry. Pleasure is good in itself, but the disordered seeking of pleasure is sinful. Sadly, addictions to food, drink, drugs, and sex including pornography are common today. Finally, the pride of life seeks the glorification of self through power, pride and adulation, which leads to an imbalanced self-assertion.

Adam showed no willingness to lay down his life for his bride by challenging the devil. In failing to protect Eve’s soul, Adam also failed to protect Eve’s heart. Because he already played the coward by not protecting Eve, it was an easy step to swallow the same deception that seduced her. The text simply says; “and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it” (Gen 3:6). He certainly showed no willingness to lay down his life for Eve by challenging the devil who appeared before them in some monstrous form. Not only was he present during Eve’s ordeal, but every time the serpent addressed Eve, he did so in the plural.

What followed, as the Catechism teaches, was a disruption of all their relationships. Shame entered their relationship, because they no longer felt secure from exploitation. Their relationship with God was so broken that they hid from him. When God confronted them, Adam cowardly blamed Eve, Eve blamed the seduction of the serpent, and God held them all responsible. Even their harmony with creation was broken. The labor of supporting a family will now become arduous for Adam. Eve will bear children in pain. Even worse, she will long for her husband’s heart, but she will have to endure a tyrant: “Yet your urge shall be for your husband, and he shall be your master” (Gen 3:16). How many daughters of Eve longed for their husband’s heart, but endured the self-centeredness of a bully? The shrill anger of radical feminism and the contraception, abortion movement was spawned by bitter, angry women who were abused by tyrannical men.

At this juncture you might be inclined to ask: “What has all of this to do with Lent?” Quite a lot as we shall explore shortly. But before we turn to that page we need to examine an important connecting passage. In spite of Adam’s cowardliness and betrayal, God’s amazing mercy propelled Him to make an amazing promise in Genesis 3:15:

“I will put enmity between you [addressing the serpent] and the woman, and between your offspring [literally seed] and hers; He [the son of the woman] will strike at your head [a death blow], while you strike at his heel [a wound].”

This passage is called the “first gospel” or *protoevangelium*. It is the promise of a husband-

redeemer, born of a woman, who will crush Satan's head, that is, totally defeat him through the vulnerable human nature he attempted to corrupt. How deliciously humiliating!

David will foreshadow this victory in his confrontation with the mighty warrior Goliath in chapter 17 of 1 Samuel. In reading this account, two things stand out in the context of this reflection: the number "6" and the word "head." Six is symbolically important because it represents sinful humanity. Adam was created on the 6th day with the "beasts," but he was destined for the 7th day, the eternal Sabbath. However, sin reduced him to the 6th, a beast. Goliath stood "six and a half feet tall" (1 Sam 17:4), and the head of his javelin "weighed six hundred shekels" (1 Sam 17:7). David said to Goliath: "I will strike you down and cut off your head" (1 Sam 17:46). The stone from David's sling struck Goliath in the *forehead* (1 Sam 17:49). Then David cut off Goliath's *head* (1 Sam 17:51). David brought the *head* to Jerusalem (1 Sam 17:54). When David was subsequently presented to King Saul, he "was still holding the Philistine's *head*" (1 Sam 17:57).

Jesus counterattacks

Centuries later Jesus, the new Adam, would utterly defeat Satan on a hill called Golgotha, meaning skull. Jesus began his formal assault on the kingdom of Satan in four steps:

1. He is baptized in the Jordan;
2. He is filled with the Holy Spirit;
3. He is driven into the desert;
4. He is tempted by the devil.

This sequence is instructive. The sinless Jesus begins by assuming the humble role of a sinner coming to John for baptism. I'm reminded of Fr. Damian would address his lepers on Molokai in the second person, "*you* lepers." Then the time came when he addressed them in the first person, "*we* lepers." Jesus voluntarily assumed the debt of the leprosy of sin He didn't own, because we, who contracted the disease and owed the debt, couldn't pay it. As a result St. Luke tells us that Jesus was "filled with the Holy Spirit" (Lk 4:1). St. Mark adds that the Spirit "drove" Jesus into the desert (Mk 1:12).

Filled with the infinite love of the Holy Spirit, Jesus was driven to engage the great battle of reclaiming the Father's rights by saving the Father's helpless children from Satan's clutches. St. Matthew informs us that Jesus "fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was hungry" (Mt 4:2). "Hungry" certainly seems like a great understatement. Wouldn't we expect a different choice of words like "famished" or "starving"? The devil cunningly waited until Jesus was physically vulnerable because He hadn't eaten in forty days.

Temptation # 1

"If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread" (Mt 4:3).

Notice that the focus of the devil's inducement is the appetite. Bread is good. God doesn't want anyone to starve, so why not work a little miracle? We can only imagine how enticing Satan made bread sound. The real issue, of course, was not food, but doing the devil's bidding not the Father's will. Jesus responded:

"Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of

God" (Mt 4:4).

In resisting the pull of His appetite, Jesus gives us the strength to control ourselves in the areas of food, drink, drugs, sexual misconduct, and pornography. Those who don't control pleasure become a slave to it.

Temptation # 2

"Then the devil took him to the holy city, and set him on the pinnacle of the temple, and said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, He will give his angels charge of you, and on their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone'" (Mt 4:5-6).

The devil cleverly used Psalm 91:11-12. Making a grand display gets people's attention. After all, the Father wants to save mankind. Why not begin with an impressive display that will capture everyone's imagination? Besides, it's the smart way to avoid the terrible suffering of Calvary! Who wants to be humiliated and suffer tortures and death when it is unnecessary?

Most heresies are connected with the misuse of Scripture, often because one passage is exaggerated and the other counterbalancing passages are ignored. In a staggering act of audacity, the devil quoted the psalm that Jewish exorcists used to expel demons, but omitted the next verse: "You will tread on the asp and the viper, trample the lion and the dragon" the (Ps 91:13). Jesus rejected the devil's distortion and cut to the chase:

"You shall not tempt the Lord your God" (Mt 4:7).

The devil was allowed to move Jesus physically, but he couldn't budge him spiritually. Thus, Jesus gives us His strength to resist the numerous tendencies to pride and adulation, which are expressions of imbalanced self-assertion.

Ironically, Jesus would have this temptation hurled at Him as He hung on the cross.

"Those passing by reviled him, shaking their heads and saying, 'You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself, if you are the son of God, [and] come down from the cross!' Likewise the chief priests with the scribes and elders mocked him and said, he saved others; he cannot save himself. So he is the king of Israel! Let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him" (Mt 27:39-42).

In the end, humility and obedience always conquers pride and power.

Temptation # 3

"Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain, and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them; and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me" (Mt 4:8-9).

The things of this world can appear very enticing. Possessions and wealth are good in themselves, but humans are easily captivated by the acquisition of things: fancier homes, newer cars, expensive clothes and jewelry, bigger TV sets, etc. Many of us sell our souls for much less than the whole world.

It may surprise you to realize that there is some truth to the devil's claim of dominion or rule over the world. Yet Scripture calls him, "the prince of this world" (Jn 14:30). When Adam

succumbed to the devil's lies, he surrendered his sovereignty over the world to Satan.

History shows that the devil does give power and fame - for a time. But his deepest agenda is always to glorify himself, not the humans he hates. In his wretched kingdom he demands that each person must "prostrate yourself and worship me" (Mt 4:9). Those who fall for the devil's deception usually find his support for their power and glory withdrawn so they can end their lives in misery and despair - like the fate of Adolf Hitler readily comes to mind. Then they come into the clutches of this megalomaniac for all eternity. Jesus put this into focus when he declared: "What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul" (Mt 16:26).

Jesus brusquely dismissed Satan as a ridiculous pretend god and the greatest of fools:

"Begone, Satan! For it is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve'" (Mt 4:10).

In this way Jesus guides us to put God first by resisting the allure of wealth and power.

Lent

The season of Lent is a time of spiritual renewal when we are "led by the Spirit" (Mt 4:1), like Jesus, to confront the devil by correctly ordering in our lives, pleasure, possessions, and pride – sex, money and power. During this time of self-examination, we often discover that there is much of the first Adam and Eve in us.

In a recent address at the Hoffinger Conference in New Orleans (January 2008), Archbishop Chaput of Denver correctly observed that "American Catholics have made themselves indistinguishable from their non-Catholic neighbors. We share their virtues as well as their vices." In his powerful keynote address, the archbishop challenged Catholics to give witness by the living example of a faithful, dynamic life. One fourth of the population of the US is Catholic, as are 5 of 9 Supreme Court justices and 150 members of Congress. Sadly, we have done far too little to reverse the slide of our country into paganism. Indeed, we have all contributed to it every time we made easy compromises with the world, the flesh or the devil. Lent is our yearly wake-up call lest we experience God's reprimand to the church in Laodicea:

"I know your works, you are neither cold or hot. Would that you were cold or hot! So because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot [meaning putrid], I will vomit you out of my mouth. For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing; not knowing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked" (Rev 3:15-17).

The critical first step always begins with a personal repentance, as we confess at Mass: "*in my thoughts and in my words, in what I have done, and in what I have failed to do.*" Lent affords us the extended opportunity to cry out with David:

"My sin is ever before me" (Ps 51:3).

but he ended with the uplifting refrain:

"The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise" (Ps 51:17).

The great St. Augustine also lamented his sinful past: "How late have I loved Thee!"

The tears of repentance are the softening agent that makes us malleable in God's hands so He can reshape us into Christ. When confronting the reality of our unfaithfulness, we are also reminded of Jesus' dying prayer: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Lk 23:34). During Lent Jesus stands at the door of our hearts like a beggar asking to come in. "O that today you would harken to his voice," pleads Psalm 95! "Harden not your hearts" (Ps 95:7-8).

To be an authentic Catholic means becoming a Christ bearer in the world in the most radical and literal sense. Which of us can truly say: "I love Christ so passionately and faithfully that when you see my behavior, you see Jesus?" Yet, in every encounter with our spouse, children, friends, and coworkers, they either meet Jesus in us or someone else.

The Church collectively and each member individually is called to become the presence of Christ on earth. Lent affords us the opportunity to see how far we are off the mark, so we can repent.

Fasting focuses on the proper ordering of our appetites. So while the immediate focus is on food, we are challenged to get a better control of all our appetites, particularly in regard to our sexuality.

The Church Regulations of Fast and Abstinence

Abstinence from meat (beast or fowl) is to be observed by all Catholics fourteen years old and older on Ash Wednesday and on all the Fridays of Lent. This obligation prohibits the eating of meat, but not eggs, milk products, or condiments of any kind, even though made from animal fat.

Fasting means limiting oneself to one full meal on a given fast day. Catholics who are eighteen years of age but not yet fifty-nine are obliged to fast on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. On fast days, two additional smaller meals are permitted if necessary to maintain strength. However, the two smaller meals together may not equal one full meal. Moreover, eating solid foods between meals on fast days is not permitted. Many Catholics voluntarily fast during all the week days of Lent.

Almsgiving has also been an important part of Lent. Here we are challenged to prioritize our finances by putting God and the poor first. This prevents us from centering our life on money, success, and things – an easy trap in our materialistic society.

Above all, Lent calls us to meet and embrace Jesus in a radical way.