

The Strain of Spiritual Exercise

1st Sunday of Lent – Year C

Deuteronomy 26:4-10
Psalms 91:1-2, 10-11, 12-13, 14-15

Romans 10:8-13
Luke 4:1-13

When one begins a regular regimen of exercise, one may experience a phenomenon that many encounter: Temptation. One might decide to do, say, fifty push-ups. But, when one gets to push-up number thirty, the body might begin to say “okay, that’s enough. You can do fifty push-ups tomorrow; or maybe only forty.” When running ten laps around a track, one might be tempted to stop after five, or maybe three. Anyone experienced in keeping in good physical shape would tell you that the important thing is to keep going despite strain or fatigue; that it will get easier each day as the body gets used to the exercise routine. The temptation to quit early is always there. However, with discipline, we learn to overcome it so as to maintain a regimen of physical exercise for the good of our bodies.

Every year on the First Sunday of Lent the Gospel Reading tells us of the Temptations of Christ; how the devil tempted Jesus and how Jesus resisted. However, do we ever consider that Jesus brought on these temptations Himself; that He deliberately left Himself open to temptation?

First, He fasted for forty days. Naturally that would make Him hungry, which would bring with it the temptation to use His divine powers to make Himself some food. After

all, being alone, who would know? Second, as God, He emptied Himself to live a human life. Naturally that would bring on the temptation to demonstrate His divine status (in this case by throwing himself off of the Temple). After all, would it be wrong to simply do what He was capable of doing? Third, He came to redeem the world through a humiliating death. Naturally that would come with an occasional temptation to achieve the same goal in a more expedient, less painful way. After all, the same result, just a different means. His forty-day sojourn in the desert left Him plenty of time to encounter temptations that go with having too much time on His hands in a remote location with little more to do than think, pray and grow hungry.

During the season of Lent, we too enter into a period in which, among other things, we encounter a more intense period of temptation. We engage in actions or spiritual exercises, of prayer, fasting and almsgiving. We, as Church, participate in various Lenten observances – abstaining from meat on Fridays and fasting on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. These observances, which we do together as a community of faith, help us to grow in unity and solidarity as Church.

As individuals we also engage in personal observances to help us grow



Temptation: The Strain of Spiritual Exercise

in our relationship with God. We are encouraged to give up something that is important to us – video games, dessert, hot water in the shower – to help us remember how God has blessed us in ways we might take for granted. We then experience a Resurrection of sorts when we take back that gift at Easter. Or we might give up a bad habit, not resuming it after Lent, to help us overcome a vice that leads to sin.

Of course, these Lenten observances come with their share of temptation; in fact, we deliberately invite temptation by taking on these spiritual exercises. We face the temptation to end the sacrifice before Lent ends, or change it to something different halfway through, or doing it only on Mondays through Saturdays under the mistaken assumption that Sundays “don’t count.” (They do count as they are days of Lent, but are not *counted* among the forty days.) We might face the temptation that because we are younger or older than a certain age we don’t have to participate in these observances because the “rules” tell us we are not obliged (“for it is written...” Satan said) – as if we Catholics need imposed “obligations” before participating in holy practices! We might face the temptation in which we decide to do something *extra*, in lieu of giving something up – losing sight of the Lenten practices of prayer, fasting *and* (not *or*) almsgiving.

Like all exercise, we encounter a certain spiritual strain during Lent. Hence our Lenten observances are referred to as “disciplines.” Greater spiritual discipline comes from resisting temptation brought on by the sacrifices and observances we participate in as individuals and as a Church

community. Through these spiritual exercises, we grow in the self-mastery needed to continue the difficult task of living the Gospel amid the many temptations that draw us away. Through all this, we end the season of Lent spiritually stronger and closer to God than when we began; spiritually ready to celebrate the Resurrection of Christ at Easter.

An increase in temptation and its intensity are to be expected during this season. While Jesus taught us to pray “lead us not into temptation,” during Lent we say “bring it on, we can handle it!” We turn to our God for the grace to endure, and to the community of the Church for encouragement and solidarity. We take occasions of temptation, and turn the work of the tempter into opportunities to turn to God for the grace, strength and stamina needed to be true followers of Christ in a world fraught with temptation.

Easter is such an important feast, that it takes fifty days to celebrate and forty (plus) days to prepare. During Lent we enter the desert with Christ where we too engage in concentrated acts of prayer, fasting and almsgiving. We take on sacrifices that help us to better know and appreciate God’s many gifts; sacrifices that – if done correctly – will invite temptation. In resisting the temptations we encounter during Lent, we grow stronger spiritually so as to resist the temptations we face throughout the rest of the non-Lenten year.

Happy Lent – and all the best in our efforts in spiritual growth as we prepare to celebrate our holiest season of Easter!

Fr. William Nicholas
February 23, 2007

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