

[Readings: Genesis 2:7-9; Psalm 51; Romans 5:12-19; Matthew 4:1-11]

“The Church is too obsessed with sin.” This is a complaint many of us have heard before. Sin makes us all feel a bit guilty, and therefore when the Church speaks of sin, everyone gets turned away from the Gospel. Who wants to feel guilty or be guilty?

We must acknowledge that there is a wrong way to speak about sin. We can approach sin not as the common problem of humanity, even of leaders within the Church, but simply the problem of this man or this woman. Everyone else is a sinner, while I’m among the redeemed. “Thank you, Lord, for not making me like others, like this tax collector over here...”

As we begin Lent, the Church invites every man, woman and youth to recognize the good news about sin. Sin is not caused by the individual faults and foibles of the weak but is instead a common condition of all of us who belong to the human family. It started with Adam and Eve. It continues with you and me.

The mystery of sin is that for some reason, we continue to engage in this same rebellion. We, like our first parents are proud. We, like them, are disobedient. This is what the Church means by original sin. There is something wrong with every person that doesn’t allow them to respond to God with gratitude. We continue to enact a cycle of violence against God and one another. We lie and cheat, we rob and murder, we grasp and seize, gossip and criticize.

The only way out of this cycle of violence is Jesus Christ. Jesus enters the desert and is tempted by the devil, tempted to seize control rather than give everything over to God. Worship the devil, and you can take control of all the kingdoms. It’s just a moment, a little lie (you don’t even have to believe it).

But Jesus will have nothing to do with this fallen and stingy logic. The good news about sin, which Jesus comes to demonstrate, is that every human being, even the Word made flesh, must deal with it. But Jesus also reveals that we don’t need to choose sin. It’s not the only option available to us. Instead of asserting our power, fighting against the logic of love at the heart of creation, we could give up this irrational fight. We could love unto the end.

Until we see the real danger of sin, its effects, we won't see the healing that Jesus comes to offer us. Maybe, we need to talk even more about sin. Think out the consequences of your choice to sin. Who will suffer in the end?

I hope you're all wearing comfortable shoes, because it's a long walk between here and Jerusalem, between Ash Wednesday and the Easter Vigil. Like Jesus did, we take this journey with friends, the community of believers. Like Jesus, we also take this journey with the devil lurking not far behind, biding his time. If the devil was gracious enough to appear in a red costume, with pitchfork and pointy tail, horns and a goatee, we could dismiss him at once and no harm done. But the Evil One has a lot more social grace than that. He knows how to meet us where we are, and to speak our language, and to make a good case for seeing things in a practical, reasonable light. That one, he's a talker, smooth enough to chat with God when the occasion arises, and bold enough to challenge even the divine Son. He makes sin seductive and attractive.

Where am I tempted to break my trusting and faithful relationship with God? What do I do to find strength in those times? Satan also tempts Jesus to break His faith in God. When do I encounter the temptation to trust only in myself, doubt God's love for me, or seek too much power? Saint Paul contrasts the disobedience of Adam with the obedience of Christ. Through one came death, through the other comes life. What are the choices I face between "life" and "death"? Do I always, in the words of Deuteronomy 30:19, "choose life"?

The devil tempted Adam, and Adam fell, losing his righteousness and innocence. The devil tempted Jesus, and Jesus resisted. Paul lets us know that we were all made righteous by Jesus' saving actions. But that doesn't mean we won't be tempted and won't sin. It means simply that we have another choice with our lives. As we prayed in Psalm 51, we need to admit our sinfulness and ask for mercy not just one time, but every time we sin. Temptations are all around us. Some of them we should be able to toss off pretty easily, others won't be so easy. That's why we need Lent to help us do better even as we ask forgiveness for the times we failed. Because ultimately, victory is ours. AMEN!

[Readings: Genesis 12:1-4a; Psalm 33; 2 Tim 1:8b-10; Matthew 17:1-9]

At the end of last month, last weekend, in fact, pastors of all parishes of the Archdiocese of Detroit received the following communication from Fr. Jeffrey Day, Vicar General and Moderator of the Curia of the Archdiocese of Detroit. He addresses the concerns regarding the Coronavirus outbreak. This is what he writes (*in italics*):

As a Church, one of our sacred duties is to look after the health and safety of the community gathered each day for worship and prayer in our parishes. Part of that duty is to help prevent and respond to infectious diseases that may be in the community. In light of growing concerns about the coronavirus and its effects on those who have contracted the disease, we ask each of our parishes to implement the following precautionary measures to help prevent the transmission of any virus."

The following recommendations were discussed at our Pastoral Team meeting last Wednesday. Please note that these are *recommendations* and not "orders from headquarters." It is up to each parish to follow or modify these recommendations.

First: "*Stay home from Mass if you are experiencing any signs of illness. In this cold/flu season, and especially in light of concerns about coronavirus, an individual **does not** commit any sin by avoiding Mass to protect others from potential spread of illness.*" Our pastoral response: We support and endorse this recommendation. If you are sick, stay home! You are dispensed from Mass!

Second: "*For those who do attend Mass, we recommend congregations suspend the practice of shaking hands during the Sign of Peace, and of holding hands during the Our Father.*" Our pastoral response: Nowhere in the liturgical books does it say that the Sign of Peace must be a handshake. This is a cultural development which had been embraced for decades in our country and elsewhere. You do not have to shake hands to share the Sign of Peace. You may simply turn to each other, nod and smile, or wave to those around you.

Some have suggested the "fist bump" or even "rubbing elbows!" One or two of our parishioners does this to me each weekend, when I greet you after Mass, if they are fighting a cold or the flu.

Regarding the Our Father, again, nowhere in the liturgical books does it encourage or mandate us to join hands during the Our Father. This is a cultural development over the decades in our country and elsewhere. Only the presider of the Mass is told to have his arms outstretched and his hands in the *orans* or palms upward prayer position. Our pastoral response is that we encourage you to put your hands also in the *orans* position as well, or to keep them folded, closed fingered or palms touching each other and hands pointed upwards as we pray the Our Father.

Third: *"We recommend that all baptismal fonts be emptied and cleaned."* Our pastoral response is that we will empty and clean out all the small holy water stoops located at all six of our church entrances and at the baptismal font. The water in the main baptismal font in the back of the church is chemically treated, so that the water is always fresh and clean. All those who wish to bless themselves with holy water may approach the baptismal font and bless themselves there.

Fourth: *"We recommend our parishes suspend offering parishioners the Cup of the Most Precious Blood during Holy Eucharist, out of an abundance of caution. Remember that the Consecrated Host is the full Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity of Christ, meaning an individual does not need to receive from the Cup in order to achieve full Communion with Christ."* Our pastoral response is that we will reduce the number of Communion Cups from six to four, as fewer people are receiving from the Cup, and recently, we have had too much of the Precious blood left over after Communion. Use common sense and discretion if you wish to receive from the Cup. Do NOT receive from the Cup if you are sick.

Fr. Day concludes with these words: *"Please know that the Archdiocese of Detroit has been, and will continue to, monitor news concerning the coronavirus. We are preparing for any potential impact on our parishes, schools, and other ministries, and will follow any recommendations from local, state and federal officials. In the event that the virus is detected locally, we will communicate detailed plans and provide further assistance."*

Thus ends the communication from "Downtown." One issue that is not addressed is the distribution and reception of the sacred host. On the tongue or in the hand? If we are concerned about hand to hand contact, the host should be placed carefully into the hand for minimal contact. We also know that Communion on the tongue exposes the fingertips of the Eucharistic Minister to receiver's saliva, which also can contain germs. Again, care should be used in placing the host on the tongue. Make sure the tongue is extended far enough to receive the host properly.

And now, a brief commentary on today's readings and how they apply to our daily living! Comfort is quite natural to human beings. When we find ourselves in a location that we know, where we have enough food and drink, a place to lay our heads and friends close by, why leave? All of us, in the end, are looking to enjoy the creature comforts of hearth and home.

Catholicism is not especially compatible with a complacent comfort. We profess faith in the God Who was born in a comfortless manger, Who hungered and thirsted in the desert, Who wandered from town to town preaching the Kingdom of God, Who spoke non-comforting words to those were religiously comfortable, Who suffered death for our sake. This God, the Word made Flesh, was raised from the dead, never staying in one place. His ascension into Heaven, at the right hand of the Father, means that His Church should also never get too comfortable.

Our home is not St. Peter's in Rome, St. Patrick's in New York, or even St. Martin de Porres in Warren. Our home is Heaven itself, the Beatific Vision, where we will see God face-to-face.

For this reason, we Christians are always on pilgrimage. We're like Abram, hearing the voice of God, telling us to leave everything behind, to move on to a land flowing with milk and honey.

The temptation to be too comfortable, to feel that we have arrived at our final destiny, may be seen in the transfiguration of our Lord on Mt. Tabor. The disciples see Jesus as He really is, as He will be when His flesh is transfigured in the fullness of divine love at the Resurrection on Easter Sunday.

How fearfully comfortable this sight must have been to Peter, James and John. They want to set up tents, to dwell ever before the transfigured Jesus, alongside Moses and Elijah. They believe they have arrived. Who wouldn't want to stay there and enjoy it?

And then the voice of the Father speaks. The Transfigured One is the beloved Son of God, the One to whom we owe complete obedience. It is an obedience of love, a delight in the voice of the Son of God.

This is the voice of Jesus that tells us to leave all things behind, to go forth into our neighborhoods, our work places, our schools, even to the very ends of the world preaching the Kingdom of God to those who hunger and thirst for justice. It is the voice that cries out upon the cross. It is the voice that speaks at the tomb of the Resurrection. It is the voice that ascends into Heaven.

The Church needs to be a bit less comfortable in our listening to this voice. When we gather at Mass, we're not just waiting to hear the words of a comfortable Gospel, confirming our lifestyle, promising us prosperity if only we believe. We're hearing the living Word of God, requiring from us an obedient response of total, self-giving love.

Lent is a time for the Church to cease being comfortable. It's time to leave behind our comfortable tents, to go forth and follow our Lord to the city of Jerusalem. To take risks and to bear our share of hardship for the Gospel "with the strength that comes from God" alone. The closer we get to Jesus, the more we profess our love for Him, the more change becomes a way of life. Grace helps get us through those changes in our lives.

Grace is that "equipment" that comes to us in baptism. Grace is available to us now and always. All we require is the humility and the courage to tap into it. Grace is power, power to conquer all that pushes us against God and goodness, power to go on living and loving. Power to be Christian in every way when being so today seems impossible. That is what grace allows us to do! To follow Him to the very foot of the cross. And to the tomb of Easter Sunday. AMEN!