

[Readings: Deut. 26:4-10; Ps. 91; Rom. 10:8-13; Luke 4:1-13]

After three weeks, we hear the voice of Pope Francis again!

From Rome: This update on Pope Francis.

Faithful around the world heard Pope Francis's voice for the first time since he was admitted to Rome's Gemelli Hospital three weeks ago in an audio message thanking believers for their prayers for his recovery. In his audio recording, the pope spoke in Spanish, with a labored and breathless voice, saying,

"I thank you from the bottom of my heart for your prayers for my health from the Square, I accompany you from here."

"May God bless you and the Virgin protect you. Thank you."

The pope's message was played in St. Peter's Square just before a 9 p.m. nightly rosary.

It marked the first time since he was admitted Feb. 14 that the world has heard his voice as he continues to battle double pneumonia. No pictures of the pope since he was hospitalized have yet been released.

Given his ongoing hospitalization, he will be unable to preside over events for the Jubilee for the world of Volunteering this weekend. As the pope continues treatment, prayers and Masses are offered daily for his health and recovery, including a daily hour of adoration and two daily Masses at Gemelli Hospital, and a nightly rosary said in St. Peter's Square that is led and attended by cardinals resident in Rome and members of the Roman Curia.

Before I share my homily reflections with you, some commentary on abstaining from meat and meat by-products on the Fridays of Lent. Debating the morality of eating an Impossible Burger from Burger King on a Lenten Friday might be as Catholic as it gets.

It's "hilarious" that Catholics on social media and elsewhere are discussing the ethics of eating plant-based products that are manufactured to taste and smell like real beef. Secular media outlets have asked canon lawyers and diocesan officials to weigh in on whether eating fake meat on Fridays during Lent constitutes a mortal sin. For the record, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops explains in its Lenten guidelines that the Church's laws on abstinence hold that meat "comes only from animals such as chicken, cows, sheep or pigs." Birds are also considered meat.

"It seems to me that eating faux meat satisfies the letter of the law regarding abstinence from meat in Lent," Father Andrew Menke from the U.S. bishops conference's Secretariat of Divine Worship.

So, canon law will not require Catholics to confess the dubious choice of eating a soy burger that tastes just like a Whopper.

But this overlooks the interior conversion and self-denial that Friday abstaining is intended to foster. "I think it goes without saying that it's against the spirit of the law," Father Menke said. "Everyone knows that!" But again, abstaining from meat but indulging in lobster or a hearty meal of fish and chips still defeats the purpose of Lent. The value we are looking for here is penance and sacrifice on the Fridays of Lent. "It's not meat, but it's certainly not suffering, either.

As we enter Lent, I would propose that today's Readings apply to our individual relationship with Jesus Christ Himself. The same steps you take to enter into a relationship and grow in that relationship with others is the same way to enter and grow your relationship with the Lord. It's all about getting to know each other, falling in love with each other, and living to serve the other.

I have not experienced such openness as I have from you folks here at St. Martin de Porres. You hunger, you thirst, you long for a closer walk with Jesus, and with your fellow pilgrims. We cry out to the Lord in our loneliness and in our need.

How many times have you called on the name of the Lord and been disappointed? How many times have you experienced disappointment in your relationships? Was it because you didn't get what you wanted? Or was it because the answer you got was what you didn't expect?

Moses gives us a short history lesson that teaches us about confidence and gratitude. He challenges the Chosen People – and us – to remain faithful even in difficulties. In our Second Reading, St. Paul challenges the Romans and us to live daily with that confidence and gratitude. Then we come to the temptation of Jesus in the desert. Jesus is “led by the Spirit” into the desert to fast and pray. The “desert” in Old Testament times was a place of evil and death. Scapegoats were driven there. Fugitives often died there.

But Jesus makes the desert a place of holy encounter. Jesus makes the desert a place of deep contemplation and prayer. And the devil leaves him... for now. “For now” are two important words.

Because the devil will come back, when Jesus is at His lowest and most vulnerable two more times: in the Garden of Gethsemane at His agony and when Jesus is hanging pitifully on what would become His Holy Cross.

The devil always will come back to tempt us and to test us in our relationships. In our self-confidence and in our gratitude.

Do we remember how God has been there for us when we most needed God? Surely, you and I have called upon the name of the Lord and in some way have been saved. Even through others who love us. Think about those times. Think about what there is in your life – maybe something no one else in the whole world even knows – that you can thank God for seeing you through. Love can be a comma, a question mark, or an exclamation point!

Enter the desert with Jesus this week. You'll be surprised at what you will find, what you might discover about yourself, and what you discover about our God! AMEN!