

Pray More Lenten Retreat - Transcript

Returning to God with Our Whole Hearts

Fr. John Burns

Hey everyone. My name is Father John Burns, and I am delighted to be with you as we begin this retreat, which is really a journey, a journey toward Easter, and through the richness of the example Christ set for us in the scriptures, and the invitation that the church holds up before us to really move deeply into knowing the Lord and turning toward Him more fully. So let's get started with prayer, and then I'm going to walk with you through the scriptures.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Good and gracious God, we stand on the threshold of a journey, a retreat, an entrance into the depths of Your heart, longing to know You more fully and know Your invitation to us, to turn away from sin and believe in the gospel. We submit this time to You, placing it before You, inviting the grace of Your Holy Spirit, humbly offering our efforts, our weakness and our failings, and inviting You to convert us, to transform us by the powerful outpouring of Your Holy Spirit. Please touch our hearts in this very moment as we begin. Help us to know You, Lord, to turn to You fully and freely, and to rejoice in all that You call us to. We ask this through Christ, our Lord. Amen. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

So, here we begin the journey of Lent, and Lent is one of those seasons, you know, that we kind of love and it and we kind of hate it. It's like every year we come to Lent and we know that it's going to be hard, that it's just not an easy season, you know. Whether we're used to the full traditional practice of the church, or if we just give up something each year a little bit, you know, maybe get to Mass more often during the week. Whatever we add or take away, we always know there's something extra about Lent.

And I want to kind of hold up at the beginning of this season a real important acknowledgement and invitation; that this season is, I think above all of the other seasons, the one in which we stand the make the most progress in the pursuit of holiness, insofar as the church is calling us profoundly and constantly through Lent to really put into practice the fullness of our faith, and in particular to turn away from sin and believe in the gospel.

So I want to get us oriented for all of Lent by looking at a couple of the scriptures. I'm going to draw from the readings of mass, and today in particular I want to just lift up a passage from Ash Wednesday and then look at the readings from the first

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Sunday in Lent. I place Ash Wednesday at the beginning because the church does as well. Those scriptures that the church lays out for us on Ash Wednesday really stand like a banner over the whole of Lent, and they remind us throughout Lent, if we return to them, the very purpose of this season that is meant to lead us toward the resurrection, but to prepare us for a fuller celebration of the resurrection.

So, the first reading from Ash Wednesday every year, it doesn't change, even though sometimes the readings rotate year after year. On Ash Wednesday every year we hear the same first reading, and it's from the prophet Joel. ***"Even now," says the Lord, "return to Me with your whole heart; with fasting and weeping and mourning. Rend your hearts, not your garments, and return to the Lord, your God.*** "Return to Me with your whole heart." That's really the invitation that rests at the center of the Lenten journey, which at times is very difficult, at times can be discouraging, at times can feel like it's rather dry.

At the heart, at the very essence of what happens to us on the Lenten journey, if we take it seriously, is this movement toward the Lord. Toward returning to the Lord and with our whole hearts, returning signifying that we've been away, and with our whole hearts signifying that this is not a partial thing. This is not a little bit more turning toward the Lord, this is an entire reorientation of our lives. And we have to really celebrate that and name that at the beginning of Lent because we go through these motions year after year after year out of need.

If one turning to the Lord was enough, then we wouldn't see this perpetuation of sin on the face of the earth. If it was enough to say "I believe in Jesus Christ," and that is all that it takes, then why do we continue to perpetuate evil in our world. As a church we move through Lent, which is a season of deep conversion, to be invited into facing our fallenness, renouncing, and repenting, returning to the Lord with our whole hearts. Ash Wednesday giving us that invitation, which we must hold at the very center of Lent: "Return to Me with your whole heart." A constant and urgent word from the heart of the Lord, inviting our hearts back to His.

Then the gospel, we have Jesus instructing us about the practice that the church has, over the centuries, discerned really lies at the center of Lent, and the practice is threefold. It's prayer, it's fasting, and it's alms giving. Now, sometimes we don't have that all in place. You know, for a lot of us we grew up giving up soda, or desert, or sweets in general for Lent, which is a tremendous place to start because it's sacrifice, and it's very important that we make good sacrifice during Lent. But when we look at the tradition of the church, going back from the scriptures into all through Patristics, the Fathers, those first writers and scholars and bishops who were kind of trying to figure out how to lead the church to the Lord, it very early

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on in our story became clear that the Lenten practice is a practice of prayer, fasting, and alms giving.

And so as you look at your Lent, hopefully you've thought of that already, but if not, now is a time to really assess what you're doing for Lent. How you're going to take seriously the invitation to return to the Lord. Because the Lord basically says to us there are 3 special ways that this return unfolds. Not only is it the sacrifice of giving something up, it's also adding a significant amount of prayer and a significant amount of sharing, of giving, of works of charity.

You see, each of these 3 affects our relationships: Our prayer, adding something, moving more deeply into the interior life, hopefully studying the faith, reading some of the saints, looking at the writings of the Fathers, delving deep into the scriptures. All of this informing our prayer, which moves us into a better relationship with God. Our fasting disciplines our body, teaches us how to deny ourselves in a holy manner, which rights our relationship with ourselves, or with our passions, our desires, our experience of living in the flesh. And our alms giving rights our relationships with others. We reach out to those who are in need - the poor, our neighbor, a friend we know is hurting. We give generously, whether it be in terms of money, or just in acts of service and kindness, all of which meet the suffering of another and bless them. You see, by prayer, fasting, and alms giving, we are moving all of our relationships toward a greater fullness. We're moving into righting our own interior space, righting our relationship with our neighbor, and righting our relationship with God.

So, I place that all in front of you because these things stand really as the essentials of a committed and a serious and, in the end, a very fruitful Lenten journey. But the focus is returning to the Lord with our whole hearts. That happens very specifically by prayer, and by fasting, and by alms giving. If we put those in place, and each of us can look throughout Lent and say "This is what I did to pray more, and better, and more fully, and understand prayer. This is what I did to give alms with a greater generosity, and a greater fervor, and a greater frequency. This is what I did to fast throughout this season."

If we can look at those things regularly, check in on them, and know that they're in place, it is guaranteed that we will make progress, as it were, toward being better people, precisely because we are responding to God's invitation. He has prompted the desire in us by grace, He has brought us to this retreat, He has brought us to this season, He's, as Catholics, He has invited to, through the journey of Lent, celebrate Easter fully. And so He has prompted the beginnings of this, we respond to those promptings with our practices, and then He pours grace into them. He

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blesses them and multiplies their fruitfulness in a way that truly is filled with that great word with which we exalt the gospel as we celebrate Easter.

So, Ash Wednesday, the banner over our Lent. Be sure to return to those readings, or at least, essentially, to those phrases and those practices throughout. Because, very concretely, we have a roadmap to what Lent is supposed to look like in order that it would bear the fruit that God wants it to bear. Now, I want to look, if we can, at the readings from the first Sunday of Lent, which are rich, really, really rich. All of the readings from the Sundays of Lent are loaded. The weekend readings are just loaded. But in a particular way, I want to point us to the fact, that having established this pattern, the church has established it by putting those readings in front of us on Ash Wednesday, now in the scriptures, on this first Sunday of Lent, the Lord Himself also informs us about what Lent is supposed to look like. And really gives us some insight into what we ought to expect in Lent.

Come with me for a moment. The scriptures, Luke's gospel is what's given to us, and it says that Jesus was filled with the Holy Spirit. And then when He returned from the Jordan, He was led by that same Spirit out into the desert. And while He was out there, He was tempted by the devil. That during those days He ate nothing, and when they were over He was hungry. For 40 days. 40 days pulls us back to an older part of our story, and I'm going to bring up stories a lot. 40 days pulls us back to an older part of our story when we, before Christians, were Jews, and we were in exile in the desert. When we spent 40 years, having left Egypt, wandering through the desert, sometimes struggling with food and drink, and faith especially. Jesus now enters the desert for 40 days, which is a very important symbolic fulfillment of that journey of Israel out of Egypt, out of slavery to sin, toward the fullness of the covenant.

Now Christ, bringing the new covenant, redoes that pattern. Heads out into the desert for 40 years. Now, what is the desert? Biblically speaking, desert, the word even that's used in Greek, doesn't necessarily mean desert. It can also be translated a wilderness place, place that is not tamed, a place that effectively is not the city. So the city is where life happens, the desert, the wilderness, is the part outside of the city, where the people don't live. So leaving the city, Christ departs from the normal routine. He departs from people, He departs from activities, He departs from just the workaday life. and He goes out into the desert, a place that is parched in many ways, doesn't have the sustenance and the flourishing and the comfort of community. It's away from all of that.

So entering into this place, it's drier and different, Christ faces off with human nature. Christ faces off in fact in a particular way with the evil one, with the tempter, the devil. And so what Christ is doing here actually, when we think about

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it, He's fulfilling, repeating a pattern and fulfilling it of the Israelites, who went out into the desert. But at the same time, He is undoing something that precedes even that. We talk about Christ as the new Adam. The first Adam faced off with Satan and fell, and we were expelled from the garden, and ever since then have been battling against our own fallenness and human nature to be holy, to be well, to be as the Lord wants us to be. Christ goes out into the desert, away from organized life, to face off with the tempter, and this time to be victorious, so that the fruit of Adam's fall need not continuously destroy us, but rather, in Jesus Christ, we have a way past that fall. I'll come back to that, but first I just want to look at this, a couple of aspects of the scriptures.

First and foremost, there are 3 temptations that Christ faces, but then at the very end of the gospel passage that we heard it actually indicates that it's not just 3. We hear each year, on this Sunday, we hear that, you know, the devil invites Him to turn stones to bread, to worship him, or to throw Himself off the parapet from the top of this large building. But at the very end of the scripture, Christ having conquered those 3 temptations, it says "When the devil had finished every temptation, he departed from Him." When the devil had finished every temptation. Meaning there is not a temptation that the devil could hurl at us that Christ Himself has not undergone, faced off with, and conquered in the flesh.

And so we have to remember that when we are facing any kind of temptation, whether it be of the flesh, of thought, of deed, whatever it might be, to know that these weapons of the evil one, which can sometimes for us seem like they are completely overwhelming, these weapons have been overcome. That, in Jesus Christ, we have the armor and we have the material necessary, and the grace that fills us to oppose every temptation. So often, one of our biggest problems is that we fight on our own. We fight against the temptations as though we're the ones who have to win the battle. And there is an interior battle, we do have to establish the virtues and do acts of charity by our own volition, but it is Christ in us who prompts the good deeds and brings them to fulfillment. It is Christ in us, in fact, who opposes whatever the evil one might bring to us.

So these 3 temptations, those are the ones we remember. But to recall at the end that actually all temptations. He faced every temptation. When the devil had finished every temptation, he departed from Him. Now, there's something else very significant about this fact: The fact that Christ is teaching us the pattern of Lent by this gospel, and that pattern involves heading out into the desert and away from the normal place of comfort, and away from some of the comforts that are there. Which is especially why we talk about fasting during Lent as a particularly important discipline. If you can think back to a couple of places in the scriptures, in the gospels where Christ expels demons, there's one part in particular where the

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apostles can't figure out why they weren't able to expel a demon, and Christ says "This kind of demon can only be cast out by prayer and fasting." Fasting, in a particular way, opposes the work of the devil. It is a serious undertaking to fast.

Now, when we talk about fasting we don't necessarily just mean going for days without eating, or even entirely skipping meal. If you know, Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, our fast, is a significant limitation of the quantity of food we take in, and then a limitation of the type. We don't eat meat, we have smaller meals. If we can skip meals we do, but we also have to be kind of prudent about these things. But fasting in general can also involve all of the other self-denials of different comforts that we might have in our daily lives, whether that be food, or any other kind of extra leisure, or things that we wrap around our lives that are nice, but that we know we don't really need. And we know that parting from them, you know, like, hurts, but also we know we're actually going to be fine.

One of my favorites actually is just to give up either dessert, or my favorite thing on the menu. And what I mean by that is if I have to go out to a meal, which I like to do, it's fun to eat, but one really painful self-denial to me is when I look at the menu and I kind of decide what I'm going to order, to decide I will not order my first choice. And sometimes I'll even say I won't order my second choice. So you look the menu over, you decide what you're going to order and say "Okay, that's not what I'm getting." And then you look it over again and say "This is my second choice. That's not what I'm getting." That is not easy, but it's also not that big a deal. You know, like it hurts, it's like "Oh, I really, really wanted the prime rib." I'm going to do just fine with the bacon cheeseburger. In fact, I'm going to do really well.

But in that little denial, I'm making an offering. And in making that offering, what I'm doing is curbing my appetite, and I'm exercising a virtue, which is the virtue of temperance, to restrain myself in the face of something that's attractive but that I don't really need. Something that's good, but not right now. And see, we strengthen this virtue by habituation, by practice, and Lent invites us in a special way to strengthen that virtue, to put it into place. And that virtue is useful wherever we put it into practice. So if we strengthen it by abstinence and by fasting, we know that it is also of good use to us when we face other temptations of the flesh, which is an extremely practical way to battle with our own fallen nature regarding our sexual desires. Just a practical hint as to why fasting is so important for opposing in general the work of the evil one, even opposing the work of the demons, who are tempting us at all times.

So I hold that up to you, especially pointing out fasting, pointing out the pattern of Lent. But I want to also say that when we look at Christ establishing the first Lent,

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if you will, or the pattern that we imitate each year that we go into Lent, it's essential to just recognize what happens at the heart of His journey into the desert, which is precisely this temptation. We have to know and even expect that if we're going to take Lent seriously, we're going to be tempted. That if we're actually going to go out into the desert, that we're going to follow Christ, we're going to deny ourselves these comforts, we're going to go deeper into our prayer, we're going to begin much more generous alms giving, we expect that the evil one will be infuriated. We expect that we will find opposition, because it is in the scriptures that that is exactly what happens.

And so, friends, let's take Lent very seriously this year, and let's see it as this chance to truly to return to the Lord with our whole hearts. And let's not be surprised if and when we stumble, but also let's not be surprised if we find it discouraging and challenging, and there is opposition that seems to come from all fronts. Because the devil doesn't like what happens during Lent. He was overcome in the first Lent in every attempt to tempt the Lord, Jesus Christ. And if we hold fast, and we lean into Jesus Christ, and we take this very seriously and allow the richness of the rhythm of the church to draw us deeper and deeper into this very powerful journey, then we need not fear.

And in fact, the temptation is a sign that we're on the right track. It means the devil is concerned with the good that is about to be born. And so when he comes lurking, we lean into Jesus Christ. We recognize that we are indeed on track, and we beg for the grace to be strong and to stand fast in the Lord Jesus Christ, so that in us will die those parts of the old self that cling to the world, and recognizing that the world is passing away and brings us nothing but dust. We turn back to the Lord and we say "With my whole heart, I return to You, Lord God."

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Almighty God, we begin our Lenten journey through the desert with You, and we humbly ask that You would guide us in all things and at all times. Pour Your Spirit out upon us as these new thoughts and insights, these invitations, Your promptings settle into our hearts as You call us closer to Yourself through prayer and fasting and the giving of alms. Encourage us with the gift of Your Holy Spirit, Almighty God, now and always, through Christ our Lord. Amen. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. God bless you all. Know that you are in my prayers.