

Entering Into Lent

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Hi, I'm Dr. Andrew Swafford. It is great to be with you. So Lent, our favorite time of the year, right? You know, St. Benedict in his rule speaks of the joy of Lent and that a monk's life should be a continual lent. And that's not overly morbid. There's a sense in which Lent embodies this life. And the Easter season embodies the glory of the age to come in heaven. And really, what Lent's all about is in many ways a reemphasis, a concentration of things that really should be part and parcel of the Christian life from beginning to end. So let's, on then let's begin in prayer here.

Opening Prayer

In the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, amen. Lord Jesus, we give you thanks and praise. We give you thanks and praise for the gift of your Son. We give you thanks and praise for the paschal mystery that you've reached into our plight, our situation. You've come an infinite distance to meet us where we are to bring us out the other side. You've died our death to raise us to where you are. We ask this through Christ our Lord, and may you bring this truth near to our minds and hearts, amen. In the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Quote from St. John Hughes

You know, I'd like to begin with a quote from St. John Hughes. He's a 17th-century French saint. A quote in the catechism, Catechism 521. And he says, we must continue, quote, *"We must continue to accomplish in ourselves the stages of Jesus' life and His mysteries and often to beg Him to perfect, and realize them in us and in His whole church."* We've said this before, and we'll come back to this, but the whole of Christianity really is from beginning to end a participation in the life of the Son through the spirit to become a son in the Son, a son or daughter in the Son through the Holy Spirit. What that means then is, to say it another way, is it's all about the Christ's life being reproduced or recapitulated through each of us, through the power of the Holy Spirit. And that really is what the sacrament's all about.

Too often, we teach the sacraments in a way that is disconnected from the scriptures, that is disconnected from the life of Christ, and actually just looking for some kind of proof text in the New Testament. Like for example, the baptism as St. Thomas Aquinas says, and as so many of the church fathers say, "Christ was baptized to sanctify the waters of baptism." What the sacraments do is what happened to Christ historically, we enter into

free the sacraments. The sacraments make salvation history present, so that we can enter into it. This is what the liturgy does. It's where time and eternity kiss.

And here, and the liturgical season does the same thing. Think about the mystery of Advent and Christmas the mystery of the incarnation, and then the mystery of Lent as a preparation for the paschal mystery to go back into His life, and to make His life present to us.

Entering into the Life of Christ

The catechism again, in this is 540 speaks of Lent this way, "By the solemn 40 days of Lent, the church unites herself each year to the mystery of Jesus in the desert, Jesus in the desert. You know, the Book of Numbers, the Hebrew name of that book is Bemidbar. Bemidbar means literally in the desert, in the wilderness. Midbar means wilderness or desert. And that's a good name for the book geographically 'cause that's where Israel is in the Book of Numbers, but it's also has a spiritual overtone.

If you read the Book of Numbers, Israel is not doing so hot. Most of the book is about these various rebellions of the people against the Lord, against Moses, against Aaron in terms of this journey toward the Promised Land. And many of them don't make it. The Promised Land is an image of heaven. Think about the manna. The manna is given in Exodus 16, after the exodus, it shows up again in Numbers 11, the manna is the bread for the journey. This heavenly bread after the exodus on the way to the Promised Land 'cause the manna ceases when they get to the Promised Land. Joshua 5 verse 12 just says, the Eucharist is the new and heavenly manna after the exodus, after the cross on the way to the new Promised Land, which is heaven itself.

Now the new manna, the Eucharist, the sign is the reality. It is Jesus. But in heaven, that sign will give way to face-to-face communion with our Lord, with God Himself. That's what the beatific vision is all about. So the Christian life is really from beginning to end and entering into the life of Christ. And Jesus, in a real way throughout the gospels, is reliving Israel's story. He's going back into the wilderness, this 40 days of fasting. He's reliving Israel's journey and He's succeeding where Israel failed. And He's also reliving Adam's journey. Jesus is new Adam, new Israel and He succeeds. He conquers, He is victorious where everybody else failed before Him.

Threefold Concupiscence

And so, in on our side of things, it's all about an entering into Christ's life. So let's may pause here. Why do we sin? Why do we sin? Saint John in his first letter, 1 John 2:16-17. gives us this this famous threefold concupiscence where he speaks of the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life. Lust of the eyes is typically referred to as, it's a Semitic way of speaking of greed. I see and I want. My eyes are wanting and sometimes envy, but very often greed, I see and I want. So lust of the flesh, lust of the eyes, and the

pride of life. Think of it as pleasure, possessions, and pride as this threefold concupiscence, threefold disposition of ours because of original sin that leads to all the deadly sins, for example.

You can hear an echo of this in the Garden of Eden, when the woman, Genesis 3:6, she sees that the tree was good for food, lust of the flesh. She sees it was a delight to the eyes, lust of the eyes and desirable to make one wise, wise without God. That's the pride of life. That's what's going on there.

And now, think about Jesus' temptations in the wilderness. "If you are the Son of God," the evil one says, "turn these stones into bread," lust of the flesh. Going from Luke's wording, which is slightly different than Matthews. "I'll give you all the kingdoms of the world," possessions. "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down. Show us who you really are, demonstrate your power." Think about vanity and pride, the pride of life.

See, Jesus is undergoing these same temptations, these threefold concupiscence, pleasure, possessions, and pride. And again, as we've said before, He doesn't go to the cross, so we don't have to. He doesn't do these things as substitute. He goes in solidarity with us as our head to send the Spirit to empower us to do the same. And He calls us to enter into this battle and into this victory.

Fasting, Prayer, Almsgiving

How so? He calls us to these three ancient practices that we should be doing all the time, but become a special emphasis in Lent. What are they? Well, think about how fasting curbs the lust of the flesh. He gives us these three whole things of fasting, prayer, almsgiving that curb lust of the flesh, lust of the eyes, and the prayer of life. They answer to the human condition. They help us enter into Christ's victory starting in our own hearts. See fasting, fasting in a way, it's a participation in the cross. The death to ourself, our desires, our flesh, this asceticism. Fasting also makes room for God. "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness."

When we curb our hunger and thirst for sex, and drink, and bodily pleasure, when we curb that desire, we can stimulate and deepen our desire for the things that matter most. We make room for God. I really think, you know, in our day, I mean there's lots of things that bring about secularization. There's lots of things that snuff out the light of faith. But I think the kind of hyper-busyness, the frenetic pace of modern life. And then you add to that, the kind of endless scrolling on a screen, I think that just is sort of like the "Parable of the Sower." The thorns that grow up, the thorns that are the cares of this world and they snuff out, they kind of steal the oxygen of the spiritual life.

When I have a student who's struggled with their faith, I'll often say, "Hey, when was the last time you went outside at night and looked up at the stars, and rekindled that sense of awe and wonder you had as a child? That really is a fertile bastion for faith to really grow. But if our minds are stuck in a screen, so you know, for example, my moral theology class I give my students a 48-hour tech fast, so they can make phone calls and they can receive phone calls, they can receive work and school emails, but no texting, no social media, no TV, no Netflix, no movies, even music, right? It's not these things are bad, but it's amazing. They'll complain that about the assignment when they hear it and that first day. And but their papers consistently, when they reflect on this after the fact, they will talk about how hard the second day was. They will talk about getting better sleep. They'll talk about being more productive. Many of them will say, "Gosh, I couldn't believe how much extra time I had." They'll talk about doing things like reading for pleasure or drawing things that they forgot how much they missed. And they will often talk about reduced anxiety. Many of them consistently will talk about that.

There's lots of things we can fast from, lots of things we can fast from. And all these things it helps to make, it's not that they're evil in themselves. It helps to make room for God, and it's a share in Christ's victory. It's a share in the cross. Almsgiving is the antidote to the lust of the eyes. Our covetous nature, I see and I want. Well, when we're giving things away, we're thinking about other people. We stop thinking about what we don't have. We cultivate a maybe a virtue that is pretty not at home in our American culture, and that's contentment. So alms-giving curbs the lust of the eyes and my friends, prayer curbs the pride of life.

The Power of Prayer

You know, I even challenge my theology majors that if you're going to study theology, if you ever find yourself doing what a non-believer could do, you're not doing theology. A non-believer could write a lot of books and talk about, even talk about God, talk about the scriptures. It can happen, but a non-believer is not going to pray. A non-believer is not going to pray. He's not going to sit in the presence of the Lord. A non-believer is not going to waste time with God.

Friends, nothing buries our pride, buries our kind of narcissistic self-centeredness like prayer. In prayer, prayer is like sitting in the sun. Prayer is like the Lord's sandpaper. Prayer is like the steady drip of water upon a rock. We might not always feel what's happening, but over time, our Lord will smooth out our rough edges. Over time, it's amazing what happens and we start to take on, we start to see the world as He sees it, as He sees it. And there's a sense in which as we grow in prayer, if fasting is a share in the cross, prayer can also be a share in the cross when we persevere in prayer through periods of dryness, for example. But it can also be a share in the resurrection, a share in the glory of the age to come, a share in what's going to be to anticipate that face-to-face communion with God. Because the deepest mystery of prayer is not asking for things.

The deepest mystery is being in His presence, and we know God is everywhere. Of course in a unique and special way, He's there in the blessed sacrament of the altar in the most singular of ways.

And I can think back to my own conversion. I can think, when I was really learning how to pray this way, to sit and listen to our Lord, to ask him what he thinks about my life. How do you call me to grow? What in my life needs to change? Where are you prompting me? Where are you taking me? Where are you leading me? You start asking those questions and it's really hard to persist in that kind of prayer, and serious sin because either you'll stop praying that way at least, or you'll stop sinning. It's really harder to do both for very long. Why? Because the silence is just too loud. And I think for so much of our culture, we just don't want to be alone with our thoughts.

We don't want to be alone with the Lord because we maybe are afraid of what we'll hear. But that kind of emotional nakedness before the Lord in prayer, this is the source of our strength in my conversion. I remember praying this way and I remember just my prayer was always, "Lord, give me the wisdom to know your will and the strength to follow it through." And the more I prayed that way, the more I had this relentless, inexorable conviction, this clarity of what I had to do and where the Lord was taking me. And I had this newfound strength to do what I never could have imagined doing only a few months prior. If we're going to be a theologian, if we're going to be a Christian, we've got to pray.

Enter into Christ

The Christian life is not knowing about God. It's knowing God and we can't get there without prayer. So prayer, fasting, and alms-giving are practices that really we focus on all year, all year, but especially in Lent because it's about going into the wilderness, into the desert with Jesus. It's about entering into His life and allowing His life to be recapitulated through our lives that He may increase and we may decrease. This is what the Christian life is all about. This is what it's all about.

Jesus answers the human condition. He answers the human condition. He reveals man to Himself and He reveals God to us. In fasting, we curb the lust of the flesh. In almsgiving, the lust of the eyes. In prayer, the pride of life, and we enter into Christ. We go where Christ went. We allow Christ to reproduce that and recapitulate that in us right now. This is what Lent is all about and that is joyful. Lent is not where we go, "Hmm, poor me. I can't believe it." You know? Or we just give up chocolate. I mean we're missing the boat if that's all it is. We're missing the boat.

What I have found is the Christian life, the Catholic life, which is the fullness of Christian life. To be Catholic is to be Christian with nothing left out. It really made sense. It really became exciting. It really became exhilarating when I went all in, when I didn't hold back, when I went all in. Half-baked, it kind of doesn't make sense, to be totally honest

with you. It doesn't make sense. When you go all in, when you take that step, you'll find, I found that God will just blow you away in generosity. You can't outdo Him in generosity. And there's always this fear, if I go all in, will I still be who I am? Will I lose myself? What so many of us have found is no, you don't lose yourself. You become a deeper, more confident, more joyful, more convicted version of who you always were. The things you liked about yourself, they go deeper, they become purified, they become transformed.

Go All in with Jesus

Lent's about going through that transformation as it is all-year round, but we need times when we really kind of recenter. What's our center of gravity? What do I mean by this? What do I mean by these deepest convictions? And there's a reason why Ash Wednesday is often the most well-attended mass of the year. Even though it's not technically a holy day of obligation. Ash Wednesday become face-to-face with our own mortality. "You are dust and to dust you shall return," Genesis 3:19, we hear that, but also in the ways we've come up short, the reality of our own sin, the reality of our own sin.

Let's not be afraid to go all in with Jesus, amen? Let's go all in. Let's let Him right straight with our crooked lines, and let's be transformed by the Divine Physician and let's allow Him to bring about His victory in us, and let's cooperate with it by a life of fasting, prayer, and almsgiving. May the Lord bless and keep you. I will pray for you. Let's let the kingship of our Lord Jesus Christ, which is crowned on the cross and through the resurrection. Let's make that a reality in our minds and our hearts. God bless you.