

Homily for the 1st Sunday of Lent – Cycle C

**Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
Springfield, Illinois**

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My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

As we began Lent this past week on Ash Wednesday, I was wishing people a Happy Lent! It might seem strange to think of Lent as a happy season since it is a time of penitential practices, but the purpose of our sacrifices, discipline, and mortification is not to punish ourselves to see how much pain we can endure, but our Lenten practices are meant to bring us closer to God, and the closer we get to God, the happier we will be.

The best practices for Lent are those suggested by Jesus himself in the Gospel for Ash Wednesday (Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18), namely, almsgiving, prayer, and fasting. The whole point of each of these practices is that God the Father “who sees what is hidden will repay you.”

These three Lenten practices – almsgiving, prayer, and fasting – are highlighted in each of our readings today.

In our first reading from the Book of Deuteronomy (Dt 26:4-10), Moses tells the people, “The priest shall receive the basket from you and shall set it

in front of the altar of the LORD, your God.” Noting that the Lord had brought them into a land flowing with milk and honey, Moses gives the example of setting before the Lord and offering of the first-fruits of the products of the soil. He does not keep the best for himself and give the leftovers to God, but gives the best to God. This is the model for our stewardship and sacrificial giving. Lent is a time to review our generosity to the Church and to those in need.

In the second reading from the Letter of Saint Paul to the Romans (Rom 10:8-13), St Paul says that “if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” The words we say about God and to God expressing the faith we have in our hearts is basically a description of prayer. Lent is a time to review both the quantity and the quality of our prayer.

In our reading from the Gospel of Saint Luke (Lk 4:1-13), Jesus goes into the desert and fasts for forty days. Technically, we do not need to fast every day during the forty days of Lent, but Lent is a time to review our intake of food and drink, moderating our consumption of calories and intake of alcohol to live more in accord with the virtue of temperance.

As we continue our reflections on the Nicene Creed during this year marking the 1,700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea, previously we looked at what it means to say, “I believe,” and what we believe specifically about God the Father. The Nicene Creed has only one sentence about God the Father and one sentence about God the Holy Spirit, but six sentences about the Son of God, Jesus Christ.

The first sentence about the Second Person of the Holy Trinity says, “I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Only Begotten Son of God, born of the Father before all ages.” To say that Jesus Christ is “one Lord” means that He alone is our Sovereign King who rules over us, whom we follow in obedience, and to whom we pledge our lives. The name Jesus in Hebrew means, “God saves.” It was the archangel Gabriel at the Annunciation who gave Him the name Jesus as His proper name. Thus, the Catechism of the Catholic Church explains, “The name ‘Jesus’ signifies that the very name of God is present in the person of His Son, made man for the universal and definitive redemption from sins. It is the divine name that alone brings salvation, and henceforth all can invoke His name” (CCC 432). The word “Christ” comes from the Greek translation of the Hebrew Messiah, which means “anointed.” Jesus was “anointed by the Spirit of the Lord” and

“fulfilled the messianic hope of Israel in His threefold office of priest, prophet and king” (CCC 436).

Then we get to the crux of the theological question: if Jesus is “begotten” and is a “Son” who is “born of the Father,” how could Jesus be God? There is an excellent answer to this question by C.S. Lewis in his book, *Mere Christianity*: “We don’t use the words begetting or begotten much in modern English, but everyone still knows what they mean. To beget is to become the father of; to create is to make. And the difference is this. When you beget, you beget something of the same kind as yourself. A man begets human babies, a beaver begets little beavers, and a bird begets eggs which turn into little birds. But when you make, you make something of a different kind from yourself. A bird makes a nest, a beaver builds a dam, a man makes a wireless set – or he may make something more like himself than a wireless set: say, a statue. If he is a clever enough carver he may make a statue which is very like a man indeed. But, of course, it is not a real man; it only looks like one. It cannot breathe or think. It is not alive. Now that is the first thing to get clear. What God begets is God; just as what man begets is man. What God creates is not God, just as what man creates is not man.”

To say that Jesus is “the only begotten Son of God” affirms that Jesus is truly God and is not created by God. While Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary in his human nature, to be “born of the Father” indicates the divine nature of Jesus.

This theological truth is emphasized in the next line: “God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father; through him all things were made.” After November 27, 2011, when the revised English translation of the Roman Missal became effective, the phrase “one in being with the Father” was changed to “consubstantial with the Father.” This translation is more in keeping with the ancient Latin text of the Creed and is a more accurate translation of the Latin, *consubstantialem*, which means, “the same substance of the Father.”

“For us men and for our salvation He came down from heaven, and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and became man.” We bow when we say these words at Mass (and genuflect when we say them on Christmas) because they express the profound mystery of the incarnation. The word “incarnation” comes from the preposition “in” plus the root of the Latin word “*caro*” (genitive *carnis*), which means “flesh.” To speak of the

incarnation of Jesus is to refer to His being born in the flesh in His human nature, which we celebrate at Christmas. We are also told that Jesus did this, coming down from heaven, “for us men and for our salvation.” The great purpose of Christ’s incarnation was to save us from eternal damnation.

Then we say, “For our sake He was crucified under Pontius Pilate, He suffered death and was buried, and rose again on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures. He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead and His kingdom will have no end.” These three sentences give a succinct summary of our essential beliefs in Christ’s suffering, death, resurrection, and ascension into heaven, where we hope to spend all eternity in the glory of His kingdom.

May God give us this grace. Amen.