

# **FIRST WEEK OF LENT**

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Sunday, February 26

## **SATAN TEMPTS JESUS**

**From *Poverty of Spirit* by Johannes Baptist Metz**

To become human means to become “poor,” to have nothing that one might brag about before God. To become human means to have no support and no power, save the enthusiasm and commitment of one’s own heart. Becoming human involves proclaiming the poverty of the human spirit in the face of the total claims of a transcendent God.

With the courageous acceptance of such poverty, the divine epic of our salvation began. Jesus held back nothing; he clung to nothing, and nothing served him as a shield for him. Even his true origin did not shield him: “He... did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself” (Phil. 2:6).

Satan, however, tries to obstruct this self-renunciation, this thoroughgoing “poverty.” Satan wants to make Jesus strong, for what the devil really fears is the powerlessness of God in the humanity Christ has assumed. Satan fears the trojan horse of an open human heart that will remain true to its native poverty, suffer the misery of abandonment that is humanity’s, and thus save humankind. Satan’s temptation is an assault on God’s self-renunciation, an enticement to strength, security and spiritual abundance; for these things will obstruct God’s saving approach to humanity in the dark robes of frailty and weakness.

Satan tries to appeal to the divinity in Jesus, tempered with the gravity and grandeur of his humanity. As a matter of fact, Satan always tries to stress the spiritual strength of human beings and our divine character and has done this from the beginning. “You will be like God”: that is Satan’s slogan. It is *the* temptation the Evil One has set before us in countless variations, urging us to reject the truth about the humanity we have been given.

Satan joins hands with Docetism and Monophysitism, wanting God to remain simply God. Satan wants the Incarnation to be an empty show, where God dresses up in human costume but doesn’t really commit totally to the role. The devil wants to make the Incarnation a piece of mythology, a divine puppet show. That is the strategy for making sure that the earth remains exclusively Satan’s – and humankind, too. Even before we really woke up to our freedom, Satan began the assault, wooing us with soft words or confusing us with a web of deceit. As a result we were never impartially summoned to personal decision.

“You’re hungry,” Satan tells Jesus. “You need be hungry no longer. You can change all that with a miracle. You stand trembling on a pinnacle, overlooking a dark abyss. You need no longer put up with this frightening experience, this dangerous plight: you can command the angels to protect you from falling ...” Satan’s temptation calls upon Jesus to remain strong like God, to stand within a protecting circle of angels, to hang one to his divinity (Phil. 2:6). The Evil One urges him to flee from the desert (the prototype of our abject poverty), to sneak away from our miserable lot that cries out to heaven. For hunger becomes a human hunger only when it can never be fully allayed; desire becomes a human desire only when it can remain unfulfilled. And nearness to the abyss becomes a human experience only when one can no longer call upon helping hands for protection.

*Monday, February 27*

## **THE FINAL JUDGMENT**

### **From a 2017 homily of Pope Francis**

Today, we have Christ before us as King, shepherd and judge, who reveals the criteria for belonging to the Kingdom of God. Here are the criteria.

The Gospel passage opens with a grandiose vision. Jesus, addressing his disciples, says: “When the Son of man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne” It is a solemn introduction to the narrative of the Last Judgment. After having lived his earthly existence in humility and poverty, Jesus now shows himself in the divine glory that pertains to him, surrounded by hosts of angels. All of humanity is summoned before him and he exercises his authority, separating one from another, as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.

To those whom he has placed at his right he says: “Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.” The righteous are taken aback, because they do not recall ever having met Jesus, much less having helped him in that way, but he declares: “as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.” These words never cease to move us, because they reveal the extent to which God’s love goes: up to the point of taking flesh, but not when we are well, when we are healthy and happy, no; but when we are in need. And in this hidden way he allows himself to be encountered; he reaches out his hand to us as a mendicant. In this way Jesus reveals the decisive criterion of his judgment, namely, concrete love for a neighbor in difficulty. And in this way the power of love, the kingship of God is revealed: in solidarity with those who suffer in order to engender everywhere compassion and works of mercy.

The Parable of the Judgment continues, presenting the King who shuns those who, during their lives, did not concern themselves with the needs of their brethren. Those in this case too are surprised and ask: “Lord, when did we see thee hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to thee?” Implying: “Had we seen you, surely we would have helped you!”. But the King will respond: “as you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me.” At the end of our life we will be judged on love, that is, on our concrete commitment to love and serve Jesus in our littlest and neediest brothers and sisters. That mendicant, that needy person who reaches out his hand is Jesus; that sick person whom I must visit is Jesus; that inmate is Jesus, that hungry person is Jesus. Let us consider this.

Jesus will come at the end of time to judge all nations, but he comes to us each day, in many ways, and asks us to welcome him. May the Virgin Mary help us to encounter him and receive him in his Word and in the Eucharist, and at the same time in brothers and sisters who suffer from hunger, disease, oppression, injustice. May our hearts welcome him in the present of our life, so that we may be welcomed by him into the eternity of his Kingdom of light and peace.

*Tuesday, February 28*

## **THREE SAYINGS OF ST ANTHONY OF THE DESERT**

### **From the sayings of the Desert Fathers**

#### 1. Which is the greatest of all virtues?

Some elders came to St. Anthony and asked him, "Which is the greatest of all virtues?" Each one then gave an opinion, some saying that "fasting and keeping of vigils" best help one come near to God; others said "voluntary poverty" and "detachment"; others said "compassion." Last of all, Anthony gave his reply: "All that you have said is both necessary and helpful for those who are searching for God and wish to come to Him. But we cannot award the first place to any of these virtues; for there are many among us who have endured fasting and vigils, or have withdrawn into the desert, or have practiced poverty to such an extent that they have not left themselves enough for their daily sustenance, or have performed acts of compassion so generously that they no longer have anything to give; and yet these same monks, having done all this, have nevertheless fallen away miserably from virtue and slipped into vice. What was it, then, that made them stray from the straight path? In my opinion, it was simply that they did not possess the grace of discernment; for it is this virtue that teaches a man to walk along the royal road, swerving neither to the right through immoderate [excessive] self-control, nor to the left through indifference and laxity. Discernment is a kind of eye and lantern of the soul, as is said in the Gospel passage, "The light of the body is the eye; if therefore your eye is pure, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eye is evil, your whole body will be full of darkness."

#### 2. Depth of the judgments of God

When Abba Anthony thought about the depth of the judgments of God, he asked, 'Lord, how is it that some die when they are young, while others drag on to extreme old age? Why are there those who are poor and those who are rich? Why do wicked men prosper and why are the just in need?' He heard a voice answering him, "Anthony, keep your attention on yourself; these things are according to the judgment of God, and it is not to your advantage to know anything about them."

#### 3. Without temptations no one can be saved

Abba Anthony said to Abba Poemen, "This is the great work of a man: always to take the blame for his own sins before God and to expect temptation to his last breath." He also said, 'Whoever has not experienced temptation cannot enter into the Kingdom of Heaven.' He even added, "Without temptations no one can be saved."

Wednesday, March 1

## **IS THE SIGN OF JONAH UPON US TODAY?**

**By Msgr. Charles Pope**

Here, then, is a deeper meaning of the sign of Jonah: if Israel will not repent, then God will take their power and strength and give it to a foreign land that knows Him not. These foreigners will shame and humiliate Israel, inflicting God's punishment on them.

This is humiliating to Israel on two levels. First, a pagan country would repent while God's own people would not. Second, they are conquered by a foreign and unbelieving people. The destruction by Assyria was a devastating blow to the Northern Kingdom of Israel and resulted in the loss of the ten tribes living there. Only Judah and the Levites were left in the South as a remnant.

Let's apply this understanding of the sign of Jonah, first to Jesus' time and then to our own.

In Jesus' time the sign of Jonah meant that if Israel would not repent and accept the Gospel, God would take it from them and give it to the Gentiles. Jesus says elsewhere to his fellow Jews, *Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit.* Just as ancient Israel's refusal to repent led to its destruction by the Assyrians, so Israel's refusal to repent in Jesus' time would mean destruction by the Romans (in 70 A.D.). This was prophesied by Jesus in the Mount Olivet discourse. According to Josephus, more than a million Jews were lost in this horrible war.

In our time, I suggest that the sign of Jonah may be active. I know that this may be controversial, but it seems to me that many Christians and Catholics in the decadent West have stopped loving life. Birth rates have dropped dramatically and are well below replacement level. We are on our way to aborting and contracepting ourselves right out of existence. God has loosed judgment on us in the form of the sign of Jonah. He seems to be saying this to us: "Fine, if you do not love life and are not zealous for the faith I have given you, then disaster is upon you. Others in this world still do appreciate larger families and are zealous for their faith. And even if they (like the Assyrians of old) are not Christian, I will use them to humble and punish you. They will grow and increase while you decrease. Perhaps when you are punished by a people who do not respect your religious liberty, you will repent and begin to love life."

In the European Union today, the birth rate is about 1.6 children per woman. Globally, Muslim women average 2.9 children. Do the math and realize that Europe as we have known it is coming to an end. In the United States the birth rate is 1.8 children per woman. In general, the Catholic world in the West is in decline, both in terms of our birth rates and our zeal for the faith. We are surely being diminished by our culture of death and decadent sloth.

Is it the sign of Jonah upon us today in the decadent West? You decide.

*Thursday, March 2*

## **AN ABBOT COMMENTS ON CH. 49 OF ST BENEDICT'S RULE** **From St Benedict and Abbot Philip Lawrence of Christ in the Desert Monastery**

The Rule of St. Benedict: Chapter 49: The Observance of Lent

The life of a monk ought to be a continuous Lent. Since few, however, have the strength for this, we urge the entire community during these days of Lent to keep its manner of life most pure and to wash away in this holy season the negligences of other times. This we can do in a fitting manner by refusing to indulge evil habits and by devoting ourselves to prayer with tears, to reading, to compunction of heart and self-denial. During these days, therefore, we will add to the usual measure of our service something by way of private prayer and abstinence from food or drink, so that each of us will have something above the assigned measure to offer God of his own will with the joy of the Holy Spirit. In other words, let each one deny himself some food, drink, sleep, needless talking and idle jesting, and look forward to holy Easter with joy and spiritual longing. Everyone should, however, make known to the abbot what he intends to do, since it ought to be done with his prayer and approval. Whatever is undertaken without the permission of the spiritual father will be reckoned as presumption and vainglory, not deserving a reward. Therefore, everything must be done with the abbot's approval.

Abbot Philip Lawrence writes:

What wisdom we find in Saint Benedict when he says that few have the strength to live a continuous Lent, even if it is an ideal. This type of thinking and writing is important because it reflects clearly how Saint Benedict is able to accept lots of different types of monks and not get totally discouraged when they are not all perfect. Just as few have the strength to live a continuous Lent, neither should we expect in any way that we will find perfect monks in any community.

This mode of thinking never takes away the responsibility of the monk to keep striving to lead a better monastic life. What it does is encourage each monk to strive to accept his brothers as they are and to work personally for a better monastic life and to work to strengthen the monastic community and its observances.

So, for Saint Benedict, even though he recognizes that the monk cannot live a continuous Lent, he still recommends various ascetic practices during Lent. It is clear that the monk should add "something" to his normal style of living monastic life during Lent. Saint Benedict is not shy about suggesting that the monk can deny himself some food, some drink, some sleep, some needless talking and idle jesting... We can understand about giving up a little food and drink, but it sounds like Saint Benedict accepts a certain measure of needless talking and idle jesting in those times which are not Lent! Probably it is simply the realism of Saint Benedict shining through in his Rule once again.

But whatever the monk does, he must receive blessing from the abbot. Monastic life is not a private life! We need to open our hearts and our souls to the abbot, always with prudence, of course, but nevertheless a true openness. This is one of the most difficult aspects of monastic life today, when we are all used to lots of privacy and also used to making our own decisions.

For Saint Benedict, being a monk means never taking a decision by oneself—ever! Always a true monk must include his monastic superior in any decisions that he takes about his life or way of living the monastic life.

May we all grow in the aspects of monastic life mentioned in this Chapter. May we strive to be strong and to offer something to the Lord. May we learn to ask our abbot's blessing on our lives and on our decisions.

Friday, March 3

## **ST. KATHARINE DREXEL – FROM RICHES TO RAGS**

**From *My Catholic Life!* website**

Despite receiving a fortune when her father died, Catherine Drexel's heart was with the poor, especially the Native Americans out West, and impoverished Black communities. Over the next two years, with the help of two priests, she made substantial donations to reservations and visited them herself. In 1887, she was struggling with what she would do with her life. She felt drawn to the contemplative religious life but knew that this would make it impossible for her to use her inheritance for charitable work. During a visit to Rome, she had a private audience with Pope Leo XIII during which she begged the Holy Father to send an order of missionaries to the Native Americans. The pope lovingly said to her, "But why not be a missionary yourself, my child?" The pope's words resonated deeply within her heart, and she soon found herself in tears outside Saint Peter's Basilica, knowing what she must do.

In 1889, Catherine entered the novitiate of the Sisters of Mercy in Pittsburgh, taking the name Sister Katharine Marie. The news traveled quickly among the social elite. Philadelphia's *Public Ledger* printed an article with the headline: "Miss Drexel Enters a Catholic Convent—Gives Up Seven Million." She made her final vows in 1891, and with thirteen companions founded the "Blessed Sacrament Sisters for Indians and Colored People." Sister Katharine was chosen as the first superior general. Mother Katharine quickly went to work, using her inheritance to found a boarding school for Pueblo Indians in New Mexico and a school for African American girls in Virginia. Over the next sixty-four years, Mother Katharine and her sisters established forty-nine elementary schools, twelve high schools, Xavier University in New Orleans for Black students, and fifty-one convents. At the time of her death, her order had grown to more than 500 women religious.

In 1935, following a heart attack at the age of seventy-seven, Mother Katharine retreated to a life of prayer. Her original longing for a contemplative life was realized and lasted for the next twenty years. Her father's will was set up in such a way that the income she received from the trust fund could only be passed on to her children. If she had no children, the money was to be distributed to religious organizations that her father had specified. Of course, Mother Katharine's order was not one of them, being founded after her father's death. Some believe that God allowed her to live until the age of ninety-six so that her annual earnings from her trust fund could be used for the ongoing charitable work of her order. She lived her last years in prayer, in personal poverty, simplicity, and charity, giving all she had and all she was to the poor. She died on March 3, 1955 and was canonized in the year 2000, only the second person born in the United States to be canonized up to that time (after Mother Elizabeth Ann Seton). Her feast day is March 3.

*Saturday, March 4*

## **SOME THOUGHTS ON COMPASSION**

**From *Tattoos on the Heart* by Fr. Greg Boyle, S.J.**

Dante speaks of having compassion for the damned. We need not feel ourselves soft on crime if we see this kind of compassion as its highest calibration.

Jesus says if you love those who love you, big wow (which I believe is the original Greek.) He doesn't suggest that we cease to love those who love us when he nudges us to love our enemies. Nor does Jesus think the harder thing is the better thing. He knows it's just the harder thing. But to love the enemy and to find some spaciousness for the victimizer, as well as the victim, resembles more the expansive compassion of God. That's why you do it.

To be in the world who God is.

Here is what we seek: a compassion that can stand in awe at what the poor have to carry rather than stand in judgment at how they carry it.

Pema Chödrön, an ordained Buddhist nun, writes of compassion and suggests that its truest measure lies not in our service of those on the margins, but in our willingness to see ourselves in kinship with them.

The strategy of Jesus is not centered in taking the right stand on issues, but rather in standing in the right place – with the outcast and those relegated to the margins.

Compassion isn't just about feeling the pain of others; it's about bringing them in toward yourself. If we love what God loves, then, in compassion, margins get erased. "Be compassionate as God is compassionate," means the dismantling of barriers that exclude.

In Scripture, Jesus is in a house so packed that no one can come through the door anymore. So the people open the roof and lower this paralytic down through it, so Jesus can heal him. The focus of this story is, understandably, the hearing of the paralytic. But there is something more significant than that happening here. They're ripping the roof off the place, and those outside are being let in.

Compassion is not a relationship between the healer and the wounded. It's a covenant between equals. Al Sharpton always says, "We're all created equal, but we don't all end up equal."

Compassion is always, at its most authentic, about a shift from the cramped world of self-preoccupation into a more expansive place of fellowship, of true kinship.