

**Homily for the First Sunday of Lent – Year C
March 6, 2022**

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

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My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, it is good for us to be here, as we observe the First Sunday of Lent. This past Wednesday, we began our annual observance of Lent, the forty-day journey that will lead us to our celebration of the sacred mysteries of our salvation: the passion, death and resurrection of our Lord during Holy Week.

For us, the word *desert* generally conjures up pictures of endless, shifting sand dunes, which is very true for the Sahara or perhaps the fictional desert planet Arrakis featured in the *Dune* series of novels by Frank Herbert and the movie by that name. However, the Judean desert was more like the Badlands of the Dakotas. It was a wild, bleak, and desolate, a place that was punctuated by rock formations and populated by wild animals and at times even rebels, fugitives, and other dangerous people.

In their Grammy Award-winning signature hit *A Horse with No Name*, the folk-rock group America repeated, *In the desert you can remember your*

name.¹ On the surface this statement might seem odd, however, under the surface it contains great truth. A place without creature comforts and distractions provides a perfect atmosphere for re-thinking and exploring who you are.

Therefore, it is quite appropriate that our Lenten journey begins with a story that is set in the desert. During the next forty days, few of us will be able to visit a geographical desert. But we do have Lent, which serves as a desert of time, rather than of place. It gives us the opportunity to *remember our name* through making space in our lives to encounter our Lord.

We must be on guard, however, for the conditions that create an opportune atmosphere for encountering God also create an opening to one's own demons. They come in many varieties, too numerous to list. At times, we ignore them and may have even become skilled at pretending they are not there or – worse yet – that they do not matter.

Our demons may have been with us a long time: a weakness of the flesh, a habit of following the line of least resistance, a tendency towards serving our own selfish interests above those of our neighbors, or, perhaps they are a feeling of guilt that lies to us and says *God is upset with us and always will be*.

Many a contemplative has concluded that there is nothing so terrifying as confronting one's own self. But that is precisely one of the purposes of the Lenten desert: confronting the reality of how we need to improve in our following of Jesus Christ as His disciples. In his writings, Saint Francis de Sales reminds us that it is important *not to lose courage in considering our own imperfections*.

Can this exercise be discouraging? Of course it can, and it would be discouraging to a fatal degree were it not for the other person that we meet in the desert: Jesus, who was there Himself.

Just a few moments ago, in our Gospel reading for today's Mass we heard a passage from the Gospel according to Saint Luke, in which the Holy Spirit led Jesus into the desert between the mountain of Jerusalem and the Dead Sea so that He could prepare by prayer, fasting and penance for the public ministry on which He was about embark.

During this time, we hear a graphic accounting of the temptation of Jesus. However, while it may seem that the devil was trying to lure Jesus into some particular sin, in reality, he was trying to entice Jesus away from the accomplishment of His Messianic mission, to use his Divine power to

avoid suffering and death. But Jesus, rather than succumbing to temptation, embraced His salvific mission and was obedient to His Father's will.

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, during this Lenten season, we are called to learn to confront and conquer temptations as Jesus did, so that we too may be obedient to the Father's will for our lives. At times, each of us may be tempted to seek sinful pleasures, easy wealth and positions of authority, and are drawn to the use of unjust or sinful means to attain good ends. However, our Lord gives us a model for conquering temptations through prayer and penance.

In his book, *Christ versus Satan in Our Daily Lives*, Father Robert Spitzer, S.J., Ph.D., points out that, "The Church Fathers and medieval philosophers recognized that three of the four cardinal virtues – prudence, temperance, and fortitude – could be brought to bear on the process of fighting temptation. *Prudence* is first in importance because it enables us to differentiate between evil desires and good desires – and between lower goods and higher goods. . . . *Temperance* is the ability to say no to an evil or lower desire. As might be suspected, it is more than just saying no. It is the discipline of our four higher powers (rational desire, conscience, empathy, and faith) to the forefront of consciousness as quickly as possible when we

feel ourselves drawn into temptation by a particular sensorial or mental image. . . . *Fortitude* is the commitment and courage to move toward the highest good in the pursuit of our ultimate and intermediate objectives.”²

Mortification is another ascetical practice that strengthens us to resist temptation. The word *mortification* comes from the Latin word *mors*, which means *death*. By dying to our selfish desires, we grow stronger when temptations come our way. Some mortifications come to us every day without our looking for them. These are called *passive mortifications*. Others are sought out intentionally, such as fasting or abstaining from meat or alcohol. These are called *active mortifications*. Father Francis Fernandez, in his book of meditations called *In Conversation with God*, says that the “source of the mortifications God asks of us is almost always found in our daily work. Mortifications right from the start: getting up promptly at the time we have fixed for rising, overcoming laziness from the first moment; punctuality; our work finished down to the last detail; the discomfort of too much heat or cold; a smile even though we are tired or do not feel like smiling; sobriety in eating and drinking; order and care for our personal belongings and for the things we use; giving up our own opinion.”³

In order to succeed in these mortifications, we must follow this advice of St. Josemaría Escrivá:⁴

If you really want to be a penitent soul—both penitent and cheerful—you must above all stick to your daily periods of prayer, which should be fervent, generous, and not cut short. And you must make sure that these minutes of prayer are not engaged in only when you feel the need, but at fixed times, whenever it is possible. Don't neglect these details. If you subject yourself to this daily worship of God, I can assure you that you will always be happy.

Finally, our almsgiving must always be made out of gratitude, as we heard in today's first reading. After recounting all the blessings received from the Lord, Moses tells how he gives the "first fruits of the products of the soil" to God and urges the people to do the same, giving their gifts to the priest, who will set it in front of the altar of the LORD, your God."⁵

So, during this Lenten season, let us enter the desert with our Lord. But, instead of making travel arrangements to visit a physical desert, let us follow our Lord as our guide and commit to a discipline of prayer, fasting and almsgiving so that we might overcome our temptations. In doing so, this Lent will be a desert experience where we will grow spiritually so that we may more faithfully live as our Lord's disciples in the midst of the world.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ America. *A Horse With No Name*. Warner Brothers, 1971.

² Father Robert Spitzer, S.J., Ph.D., *Christ versus Satan in Our Daily Lives* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2020), pp. 207-208.

³ Father Francis Fernandez, *In Conversation with God*, vol. 2 (London, New Yor: Scepter, 1989), p. 47.

⁴ St. Josemaría Escrivá, *Furrow*, 994.

⁵ (Dt 26:4-10).