

Lent: Our Special Time with Christ



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Lent is early this year, beginning with Ash Wednesday on February 17. Although, with all the problems associated with COVID-19, it may indeed seem as if we have been living in an extended Lenten period the last several months! The Gospel for the first Sunday of Lent always has one of the accounts of Jesus' temptation by the devil after His 40 days of fasting in the desert, prior to the beginning of His public mission. He was tempted in every way that we are but never sinned (Hebrews 4:15). One of my favorite stories about temptation involves a young boy who was hanging around a fruit stand outside a small market. The shopkeeper was keeping an eye on the boy so that he would not steal any of the fruit. He finally went out and said: "Young man, are you trying to steal one of my apples? No, sir, the boy said, I'm trying not to!" This can serve as a paradigm for all of us, namely to avoid the situations that lead us to sin. The much-loved Ste. Therese comments in her autobiography that God protected her from sinful situations, knowing how weak she was.

As members of Malta, we strive all year long not just to avoid temptation and sin, but to stay close to the Lord in prayer, and in good works for the sick and the poor. Lent is like a miniature of life. We do not resist temptation to sin by strong will power or stoicism, but by growing in the love of Jesus through prayer. St. John Chrysostom (d. 407 A.D.) wrote extensively on prayer. Here are just a few of his comments which are still applicable for us today:

"Prayer is a partnership with God. I do not mean the prayer of outward observance but prayer from the heart, not confined to fixed times or periods but continuous throughout the day and night. Our spirit should be quick to reach out toward God, not only when it is engaged in meditation; at other times also, when it is carrying out its duties, caring for the needy, performing works of charity, giving generously in the service of others...It is a longing for God, love too deep for words, a gift not given by man but by God's grace. The apostle Paul says: 'We do not know how we are to pray but the Spirit Himself pleads for us with inexpressible longings.'"

Let's all look at Lent as an opportunity, a time of grace to grow closer to Christ. In spite of the many problems facing our nation and our Church these days, let us all keep our eyes focused on the Lord and on our Order's mission. Growth in our prayer life strengthens us against temptations of all kinds, and deepens our union with the Lord.