



Archbishop's Lenten Letter 2010

"THE WORD IS NEAR ... ON YOUR LIPS, IN YOUR HEART"

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

Lent is about each Christian's call to renew the death to sin and rising to newness of life with Christ that took place when he or she was baptized.

We do this as we accompany, in prayer and with other gestures of support the "Elect", who will celebrate the Sacraments of Christian Initiation at the Easter Vigil.

The first Lenten preface describes well this season of grace, praising God for personal transformation: "As we recall the great events that gave us new life in Christ, you bring the image of your Son to perfection within us".

As Lent approaches, Christians consider ways to develop their spiritual union with Jesus.

Of course, we do have some practices in common. The Church asks us to fast on Ash Wednesday, to mark the beginning of our pilgrimage with Christ, and again on Good Friday, in gratitude for Jesus' death on the Cross out of love for us and to take away our sins. To remind us of this, Fridays throughout the year are days of abstinence from meat, but Catholics may substitute special acts of charity or piety. This Lent, I recommend we make an effort to practice again abstinence from meat on Fridays in memory of the Lord's Passion.

We are encouraged to make sacrifices—of our own choosing—on the weekdays of Lent. When we cut back on food or other legitimate pleasures, we are encouraged to give the money saved to benefit the poor.

On Solidarity Sunday—March 21—the faithful in Canada make a sacrificial offering to assist the poor countries of the world through “Development and Peace”, the official charitable organization of the Canadian Catholic Bishops.

Pope Benedict XVI, in his encyclical “*Caritas in veritate*”, recalled that every person on earth has the fundamental right to life. We should always remember this and, whenever we good we do for the poor, this principle should underlie our efforts to alleviate poverty and suffering. Through its special oversight committee the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops intends that every activity of Development and Peace be informed by this vision.

A traditional act of Lenten piety is that of a making good confession. This is a grace that our priests wish to share with you in this “Year of the Priest”, which recalls the confessional ministry of St. Jean-Marie Vianney, a most extraordinary physician of souls.

Finally, I recommend to you the practice of *Lectio divina*, a process of prayerful reading and reflection (some pointers on how to do this accompany this letter). Your prayerful reading may focus on the Lenten Mass readings of each Sunday or of each day’s Mass. Meditating on Scripture offers a rich spiritual discipline for personal growth.

On the First Sunday of Lent, we learn that Jesus was steeped in such knowledge of the Bible. He called on scripture passages to refute the devil and overcome temptation. To overcome the tempter, Jesus quoted from Deuteronomy, a text he must have contemplated often. Scripture can likewise strengthen us.

In resisting the first temptation to turn stones into bread for his nourishment, Jesus recalled that “one does not live by bread alone”. Besides attending to one’s physical sustenance each day, disciples feed on God’s Word for spiritual nourishment.

In the second reading for the First Sunday, Paul also cites the Book of Deuteronomy, showing that for those who ground themselves in reflection of the Scriptures, “the Word is very near you, on your lips and in your heart”

(Deuteronomy 30.14-Romans 10.8). Grasping God's Word inwardly, then, helps disciples to meet the challenges in our struggle to be faithful to God's way.

The Christian gradually identifies with Jesus who won the victory over sin for us. The stories of Jesus and of his followers become one through various Lenten observances, including scriptural prayer.

Blessed Lent!

Fraternally yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Terrence Prendergast, S.J.", with a stylized flourish at the end.

Terrence Prendergast, S.J.
Archbishop of Ottawa

FAST AND ABSTINENCE IN CANADA

The Church prescribes fasting (only one full meal and two smaller meals which together are not greater than a full meal) and abstinence from meat on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. Catholics aged 18-59 are bound to fast; those 14-59 to abstinence. Those who are ill are freed from these obligations; all, even above the age of 59 may continue to fast and abstain.

Parents and educators are reminded of their duty to introduce children gradually to the understanding and practice of penance. Adult example will be the greatest influence in this matter.

Lectio divina illustrated by the Sunday Readings
First Sunday in Lent (Year “C”)--February 21, 2010

“THE WORD IS NEAR ... ON YOUR LIPS, IN YOUR HEART”

[Texts: Deuteronomy 26:4-10 [Psalm 91 (90)]; Romans 10:8-13; Luke 4:1-13]

Besides fasting and almsgiving, Christian tradition emphasizes greater attention to the life of prayer during Lent. *Lectio divina* or “holy reading” is particularly appropriate as disciples of Jesus “prepare to celebrate the paschal mystery”—the Lord's Supper, the Commemoration of the Passion and the Easter Vigil—“with mind and heart renewed” (*Preface of Lent 1*).

Devotional perusal of the Sunday (or daily) Lenten Scriptures may take a variety of forms. The following pattern, with four phases (reading, meditating, praying, contemplating), is an ancient form dating to medieval times. It is offered as one model that may prove fruitful for followers of Jesus when practised regularly for 10-30 minutes at a time.

Beginning *Lectio Divina*

Before *Lectio Divina* one becomes aware of God's presence and asks that one's prayer be directed to God's glory and one's personal good. Then, one begins the four steps without being too preoccupied; the important thing is to delight in being with God for this short period of time.

1. **Reading** reverently the scriptural story of Jesus' temptations takes very little time. However, the first part of *lectio divina* consists in quiet repetitions of the text, savouring its special quality and noting specific features. For example:

In the opening words, the reader learns that Jesus was said both to be “full of the Holy Spirit” and “led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days He was tempted by the devil”.

At the end of the forty days three of Jesus' temptations were singled out for mention (“command[ing] this stone to become a loaf of bread”; worshipping the devil to receive the glory and power of “all the kingdoms of the world”; and throwing Himself down from the Temple pinnacle so that God might rescue Him).

In each instance, Jesus refuted the devil with a quotation from the Book of Deuteronomy, a text which Jesus Himself must have meditated on often. The narrative concludes by observing that “when the devil had finished every test” (were the three simply typical ones?), he departed from Him “until an opportune time” (i.e., the Passion, when “Satan entered into Judas Iscariot” [22:3]).

Unlike the accounts of Mark and Matthew, Luke said nothing about angels coming to minister to Jesus after the temptations (cf. Mark 1:13; Matthew 4:13). Later, Luke alone noted the presence of a comforting angel during Jesus' Gethsemane prayer (Luke 22:43-44).

2. **Meditating** consists in diligent mental reflection upon the truth hidden in the reading. Some such thoughts might include the fact that, like Jesus, Moses and Elijah had fasted for forty days at critical periods in their ministry. That Adam, in paradise, and Israel, for forty years in the wilderness, failed the test of temptation and trial, but Jesus did not.

When one attempts to visualize the scene of the temptations, one notes that there is something mystical about the second and third temptations (the devil showed Jesus “in an instant all the kingdoms of the world”; and “the devil placed Jesus on the pinnacle of the Temple”). Still the issues were real. Jesus seized what was at stake, and refused to be taken in.

3. **Praying** means a persevering appeal for divine help in achieving communion with God. It often issues spontaneously from the steps of reading and meditating, as persons see their relationship with Jesus or the issues at stake in their lives before God.

What Paul said to the Romans in the second reading—quoting Deuteronomy as Jesus did—is an apt commentary on this third step of *lectio divina*, “The Word is very near you, on your lips and in your heart” (cf. Deuteronomy 30:14). Now, the issue becomes one of belief in the heart that moves to expression (“for one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved”). One prays in one's own words or in a formula such as today's psalm (“be with me, Lord, when I am in trouble”).

4. **Contemplating** may be defined as the fruit of God's compassionate response by which devout hearts raise their gaze to God in sentiments of faith, hope and love. At this point, the disciple of Jesus attempts to speak intimately to God—as to a friend—about the matters pondered in prayer.

Just as the Israelite identified with Israel's history when he and his family came before the Lord at harvest time (“A wandering Aramean was my ancestor... The Lord brought us out of Egypt”, so the Christian identifies with Jesus who has won the victory over temptations. The story of Jesus and the Christian gradually become one through prayer.

Concluding the *Lectio Divina*

As the time set aside draws to a close, in the Holy Spirit one speaks simply to God the Father and to Jesus His Son, closing with the Our Father or some other favourite prayer.