Lent is a Good Time to Look in the Mirror

A little boy once decided to give up fighting with his brother for Lent when his dad encouraged him to look at ways to become a better person for Lent. About halfway through, things seemed to be going quite good. There was a bit less mayhem in the house, and the brothers seemed to get along.

The dad asked his son how Lent was going. He said oh just fine dad. But then he smiled. “But I have to tell you, I sure can’t wait for Easter!”

Well, at least he got part of it right - giving up sin. But we want to give up sin for good, not fall back into at Easter. We might not be able to overcome all sin, but we can make big strides when we combat the effects of original sin.

Original sin refers to how at some point, we as humans evolved to the point where we could choose right from wrong. We then misused our gift of free will, and would begin to choose things that were evil, sometimes not knowing them to be evil at the time. Left on our own, we can’t really become perfect or overcome that. And there’s a consequence for evil actions; they lead to constant frustration. This is symbolized in the story of Adam and Eve and the apple and the serpent in the Book of Genesis, our first reading this week.

When we have a baptism, we believe that original sin is removed. In baptism, we are saying you are no longer claimed for sin, but are claimed for God - so what we call “original sin” is removed.

The issue then becomes what we call the “effects” of original sin. Our catechism notes that after the first sin, the world is virtually inundated by sin. Jesus is God’s answer to this to help us, but we have to respond to what Jesus did by growing in grace and love. To again quote the catechism, when talking about why sin was permitted in the first place, our Church quotes St. Thomas Aquinas who wrote, "There is nothing to prevent human nature's being raised up to something greater, even after sin; God permits evil in order to draw forth some greater good.”

Lent gives us a chance to take a long, hard look at sin, for we are all sinners, but we also have the potential to become saints. So what better time than Lent than to take a look at where we are going in life, and try to become better people.

A few practical things to do as the season of Lent continues:

1. Make use of confession and come to Mass. Both Eucharist and Reconciliation help give us strength to resist temptation, and grow closer to God. We are never alone in our battles. Tomorrow night is our parish confession service, a great opportunity to experience mercy and healing.

2. Remember the words from the act of contrition, “avoid the near occasion of sin.” The serpent we meet in the first reading and again in the Gospel is there to tempt. Adam and Eve give in; Jesus doesn’t. It’s worth thinking about that serpent, because there can be many types in our life. Perhaps a person or so-called “friend” who causes us to make bad decisions; or times of day when we are vulnerable; or alcohol or stress. If we remove these “serpents” in our life, we might find come Easter that Lent that we have also made strides in leading a better life.

3. Don’t beat yourself up. Again, God is always going to be there for you. The first thing Adam and Eve do is to hide from God. There are consequences for their actions, but Jesus is the ultimate answer. You will make mistakes again - hence the effects of original sin - but the key is going back to God and seeking out His love and mercy.

4. Learn from your mistakes. Why did you take that “apple”? When we look back on our sins, we can seek ways to avoid them in the future.

5. We have to ask ourselves how are we helping - or hurting - one another? Remember, people learn from our actions. If we are making some bad decisions, others from those under our roof in the family to those we meet are going to be impacted by our actions and inactions.

6. Look for the hidden sins. This is part of a healthy conscience, where we examine how to become better and seek out the things we might be overlooking called “sins of omission.”

7. Always see the glass as half full. Finally, remember that God looks to the heart and He always looks at us with love. It can be frustrating when we give into sin or have those same struggles, but we shouldn’t be ourselves up. It takes time to become a saint, and God will always help us on the way.

8. Changing for the better, permanently. As we sometimes offer things up or give things up in Lent, consider the things that should go for good, and the things that maybe you can offer up to make you a better person. For the sins you want to eliminate, again what caused you to do them? What maybe can you eliminate to make them less likely, or add to prevent them (such as prayer, bad influences, stress causing you to make a bad choice, etc). With things to improve your life, it could be developing a healthier lifestyle with diet and exercise; or a better attitude of love towards your family by spending less time scrolling and texting and more time having real conversations; or putting time for prayer in daily at a set time; or doing more acts of charity for loved ones. These aren’t things you’d want to eliminate come Easter, but hopefully make a permanent way of life.

Lent is a wonderful season that helps us grow closer to God - and far better than giving up Oreos is giving up those things that cause us to sin. This week’s Gospel is a great way to reflect on sin in our lives, and to open our eyes to the reality of sin and temptation, but most importantly grace and love which can help us overcome it and truly change for the better.

Have a very blessed Lenten Journey!

Fr. Paul