

1st Sunday Lent Year "A" *Do you think you can live without them?*
March 8-9, 2014
Readings: Genesis 2: 7-9; 3:1-7; Romans 5: 12-19; Matthew 4:1-11

There is an amazing passage in the midst of St. Augustine's *Confessions* where the then Bishop, Augustine, is recalling the events immediately prior to his conversion to the faith. He was personifying his vices, calling them his "mistresses," and giving them a personality like one who would pluck at his garment of flesh, holding him back from real and substantial commitment.

They spoke to him murmuring softly, "Are you sending us away?" And, "From this moment shall this or that not be allowed you, now or forever?"¹ But at this point, they were no longer screaming as perhaps they did in his youth. Now, he was so close to the point of conversion, these vices began to be heard "not half so loud; they no longer stood against me face to face, but were softly muttering behind my back, and as I tried to depart, plucking stealthily at me to make me look back at them."

Still, he realized that was enough to keep him from shaking them off once for all. And then he writes something very interesting. The strong force of his own habit spoke to him: "Do you think you can live without them?" This sentiment of Saint Augustine is one reason why this work has touched countless lives throughout the centuries. It speaks to our human condition, one such that it matters little if we live in the 4th or the 21st century- the realities are the same. Our bad habits and sins can become so habitual that it is really no longer a question of the intellect, but one of the will. "Can we live without them?"

The readings for the first Sunday of Lent, focus on the account of

¹ Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, VIII, 11, 26.

Jesus' temptation by the devil. It is the classic biblical scene of Good vs. Evil, outside of the account in the Garden of Eden. "All these I shall give to you, if you will prostrate yourself and worship me." Just give in; let it go, all will be well if only you will do this. These words of temptation are powerful reminders that none of us is immune from such difficulties as we wage this inner war with our vices, our ambitions, our weaknesses.

The season of Lent is so important because it forces to do that which on a natural level at least, makes us recoil. It forces us to take a good look at ourselves and face our weaknesses and our sin square on, without any more excuses. Like Augustine, we are gripped by the force of habit to the point that we wonder if we can do without, even if we know that intellectually, we should be able to say "Yes."

Take for example technology. How difficult would it be to fast from modern technology? For me, it would be incredibly difficult. It is not a question of saying that such technology is bad, not at all. However, it so easily consumes our minds. Today, I think of all the cars and mini-vans that come fully equipped with video entertainment systems. We've come a long way from the "alphabet game," I recall as we made cross-country drives. The next time you are in an airport, take a look at how many people, while waiting for a flight, are reading a book versus listening to an iPod, working on an iPad or laptop computer.

How do we hear the voice of God amidst such a cacophony of sights, sounds and images? By saying "no" to some of these morally neutral things, we free ourselves to spend more time in the presence of God, but also we train ourselves in the important art of self-denial. If we learn to deny ourselves in key area, such that sacrifice is no longer seen as a bad word, but as a necessary component of the spiritual life, we'll grow in holiness.

In his Lenten message for 2014, our Holy Father concentrated his gaze upon poverty in all its forms: material, moral and spiritual. He noted that God, “does not reveal himself cloaked in worldly power and wealth but rather in weakness and poverty.”² Some are enslaved by vice and sin, others are trapped by unjust working conditions, while still others suffer from a spiritual destitution because they have turned away from His love. The Holy Father said that “In the poor and outcast we see Christ’s face; by loving and helping the poor, we love and serve Christ.”

So as we embark upon our annual spiritual retreat, let our thoughts and efforts be directed towards asking God for the strength to attack our sins at their root, to realize that we can indeed live without these vices, and in so doing we discover our true freedom as sons and daughters of God; indeed we discover our true selves.

² Pope Francis, (Lenten Message 2014 para. #1)