

The Rector's Chronicle

A Newsletter of the Church of St Michael the Archangel

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Dear Parishioners and Friends,

February, 2009

Lent begins on February 25th (Ash Wednesday) this year. Apart from those who ignore Lent, some look forward to it; most, it seems, dread it. I can understand both attitudes. Lenten disciplines are not usually pleasant (I, for one, do not enjoy fasting), and the self rebels against self-denial. Life seems hard, even bitter, especially when the last throes of winter coincide with the fasting and temptations which accompany Lent. On the other hand, Lent is a time when we can clear the decks and focus on Christ. The disciplines provide us support in living an intentionally Christian life – something we intend to do all year, but which seems to go better in Lent. Moreover, the denial of the demands of our flesh (through fasting and otherwise) tends to quiet those demands, leaving us better able to pray and to live lives of Godly quietness – which is actually more enjoyable than giving in to the flesh (though we may not always want to admit the fact).

Which is to say: I know that Lent is not always (or ever?) fun, but I still encourage you to undertake a serious disciple this Lent. You have time to think about it and figure out something appropriate before Lent starts. This should include fasting, unless your health or physical demands prevent it. In that case, some alteration of diet would be in order – giving up some favorite foods, for example. The Lenten fast is normally a limiting of the quantity of what we eat. A reasonable approach is no snacks, seconds, desserts or alcohol. The aim is not to lose weight (though that may occur) but to deny our fleshly appetites, and subject them to the spirit. This allows our whole being to be more rightly ordered to the service of God, in body as well as soul. When we consistently given in to our bodily desires, eating whenever we are hungry (e.g.), then we do not realize how much we are ruled by those desires. This we learn when we fast.

It is a forty days' fast: commemorating Jesus' forty day fast in the wilderness after His baptism. This means that the fast also draws us closer to Him. It teaches us in some small way of His love for us – since it was for love of us that He fasted. Whenever we hunger during the fast, we should be reminded of Him and His loving suffering for us. Fasting (like Lent generally) should be focused on Christ.

Prayer should also be a part of our Lenten discipline. Lent is a good time to begin something which you have been thinking you'd like to add to your regular devotions: whether Morning Prayer or a weekday Mass or a regular time of quiet. Or, if your regular prayer life is in good order, then to add to it for Lent: Friday Devotions (see below) with the parish, or a weekday Mass, or a holy hour before the Blessed Sacrament, or a special time of intercession. A list of other suggestions for Lent is available on Sundays at West Laurel Hill.

On Ash Wednesday, there will be a Mass at the rectory Oratory at 10 o'clock, and a Sung Mass at West Laurel Hill at 6:30. Ashes will be blessed and imposed at both Masses. Be sure to get Lent off to a good start by being at Mass on Ash Wednesday. Please bring back your palms from last Palm Sunday no later than Quinquagesima, February 22nd – these are burned to make the ashes for Ash Wednesday. I encourage you also to attend the **Lenten Quiet Day** on March 14th, 9:30-2 at All Saints', Wynnewood.

Events

Tom Howard will be in the area this month, and you are invited to hear one of his addresses. He will be here as a speaker at a conference for Anglican military chaplains, which Bishop Moyer has put together for his chaplains and for other Anglicans. Mr Howard is well known for his writings, most of which are on the Faith. He is also known as the brother of Elizabeth Eliot, a prolific writer and speaker, and former missionary whose husband was killed in the mission field. They were raised as Protestant Evangelicals, and he became an Anglican while at Wheaton College in Illinois. Some years later, he became a Roman Catholic. He will be speaking about this part of his life, his talk being titled (as is one of his books) *Evangelical is not Enough*. The address is on Tuesday, February 17th, and begins at 6:30. (There will be no School of religion class that night.) It is at Dalysesford Abbey, on S. Valley Road in Paoli. No reservations necessary.

The monthly **Sunday Adult Forum** will be on Sexagesima, February 15th, following the ten o'clock Mass. This month's topic is meditation, also known as the prayer of quiet. The class will focus principally on practical matters of how to do it, as well as its place in the Christian life. The class will run about a half hour: bring your questions.

The **Friday Lenten Devotions** will see a change this year, since Stations of the Cross at All Saints has not proven accessible for many people the last two years. We will still do Stations at All Saints at 7 on

March 6th, 20th, and April 3rd. On March 13th and 27th, instead of Stations, there will be a service at the rectory: I will give a meditation, followed by silence before the Blessed Sacrament and Benediction. These will be at 7:30, and last less than an hour. I hope the change will enhance our Lenten devotions, without adding too much confusion. Please come!

Purity

We live in an age of sexual license, to say the least. To take but one example, the advertising industry has progressed beyond the old saw, "Taste doesn't sell steak; sizzle does." Now we have sex used instead of sizzle. Sex is used to sell everything from magazines to toothpaste. We encounter lasciviousness on billboards and television programming, in catalogs and store windows, in books and movies. We now see things in the comics and on the front page of the newspaper which a generation ago would have been scandalous – such that one can no longer encourage young readers to read the paper every day. More directly, pornography is more readily available than ever before, thanks to the Internet (and the dropping of cultural barriers). I don't think I need to belabor the point.

As Christians, we know that lust is a sin. We know that sexual activity is confined to marriage. So far, so good. Purity, however, goes beyond not committing fornication and avoiding pornography. It is the cultivation of a virtue in the heart and not merely the avoidance of sin. Purity of heart loves God first and whole-heartedly, and loves others with the love that God gives us. Things are loved only within the love of God. We should love things only as they serve Him and lead us to Him, and not as ends in themselves, or as mere objects of our desire.

A nineteenth century devotional manual for priests (the anonymous *The English Priest's Vade Mecum*, 1875) has some good practical advice for the cultivation of purity. Though intended for clergy, it is of general applicability – and though in Victorian prose, it is still useful in our day.

That thou mayest in this point [chastity and purity] be without reproof at the coming of the Lord, chiefly observe the following: -- 1. Chasten thy body and bring it into subjection; if thou accustom it to ease, it will grow wanton to thy destruction. 2. Use but little wine, for it hath destroyed many. 3. Seek not the company of women ... 4. Be on thy watch principally at the beginning of temptation, and slay the enemy while he is young. 5. Never be idle, let the devil always find thee occupied with something. 6. Very greatly humble thy soul; St Bernard saith, "that chastity may be deserved, humility must be preserved." And chiefly commend thyself to the protection and mercy of the Lord, the most pure Son of the most pure Virgin, the King of virgins, and the lover of chastity and continence. "Create in me a clean heart, O God!"

Self-indulgence, whether physical or emotional, lays a foundation for impurity. So we should not be surprised if we find ourselves tempted to impurity after a large meal with much wine. Likewise idleness gives the enemy an opening – like the house swept and garnished, but empty (St Matthew 12:44).

Even more important is humility. Purity is impossible for most Christians by their own efforts – even outward purity, much less purity of heart. It is only possible by surrender to God: He has the power to overcome our temptations of the flesh. We are (or should be) humbled by the weakness of the flesh, and so the temptations of the flesh lead us to depend more intimately on God's grace. I suspect that one reason God allows the temptations of impurity is to help us to learn humility. So if you should find yourself struggling with temptations of impurity of one sort or another, it is worth asking whether the root is your pride: are you trying to conquer the temptations by your own efforts rather than abandoning yourself to God's mercy? Likewise, are you trusting Him that the trials are for your spiritual benefit (however unpleasant they may be), or are you rebelling against His providence? This may be the opportunity to learn to trust His power as well as His mercy to do in us that which we cannot do ourselves. The bottom line is that God uses the struggle with impurity for our good, and we can trust Him even in the midst of the struggle.

We should remember that while purity is good for our souls, it is perhaps even more important as the means to intimacy with our Lord. Purity allows us to receive and return the love of God. It gives us a sound foundation for quiet, for entering into the Presence of God unhindered by disordered passions. It allows the good force of our passions to be rightly ordered to the love of God. "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." (St Matthew 5:8)

Kudos

Thanks this month to:

- Gary Sugden for the Rose Sunday and Christmas flowers (I forgot to mention him last month).
- Barbara Freeman and many others for the lovely Christmas party for the parishioners.
- Samuel White, Gary Sugden, and (occasionally) Kevin Ethridge, Andrew Ducsik, and John McCann, for serving as ushers at Mass (I forget these at the parish meeting – apologies).
- To all who attended the annual meeting, and all who support the parish in so many different ways.
- My mother, for doing all the folding and stuffing for last month's (and this month's) mailings.

Faithfully,

