

- For millennia our Lord has shown His love for wayward man by entering into covenants with us, promising to be our God and to save us from our sins.
- God first made a covenant with Adam and Eve, and even though that covenant was broken by our first parents, He made successive covenants with Noah, Abraham, Moses and David. We hear about the covenant God made with Noah today in our first reading.
- Eventually God the Father made a new and eternal covenant with mankind through His Son Jesus Christ – a covenant into which all of us are invited.
- Unlike a contract, which is merely an agreement for an exchange of goods and services, a covenant implies an exchange of one's very self. A covenant is a holy bond, permanent in nature, which is brought about through the swearing of an oath.
- We enter into a covenantal relationship with God when we are baptized. At that most special moment of our lives, we (or our parents and godparents on our behalf) make a promise to be true to God: faithful in our love for Him and obedient to His commandments.
- God, in turn, promises to give us every grace we need to persevere in our baptismal promises so that He might save us on the Last Day.
- This covenantal relationship with God, inaugurated at baptism, is then consummated through the reception of Holy Communion.
- Receiving Holy Communion is our way of saying to God, "I want to be with you. I wish to give myself fully to You, and I desire that You give Yourself fully to me" – just as man and wife do when they enter into the nuptial act.
- It's amazing to think that the Almighty God binds Himself to sinful man, but He does! God gives Himself fully to us in the sacraments, and He desires that we give ourselves fully in return.
- There is a real exchange of persons when we kneel down and receive Holy Communion, for we receive our Lord's body and blood into ourselves, just as a bride receives her bridegroom.
- It's for this reason that marriage has always been the primary symbol or analogy used by Holy Mother Church to elucidate God's relationship with mankind.
- But as most of you know all too well, marriage takes a lot of work; it takes discipline and sacrifice. And our covenantal relationship with God is no different: it takes discipline and sacrifice as well – for true love is not possible without these things.
- So the spiritual practices that we take on in Lent are ways that we "work on" our marriage with God. Our prayer, fasting, and almsgiving – all of the little sacrifices and acts of penance that we do in Lent – are meant to be done as a means of showing God our love for Him.
- These spiritual practices are ways for us to both prove and purify our Lord for God.
- So it's important that we do our Lenten practices as a conscious act of love for God, and not out of a sense of strict obligation or habitual ritualism.
- In the Gospel today we hear the story of Jesus' 40 days in the desert, of how He fasted and prayed and was tempted. We hear this Gospel on this 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Lent because Christ's 40 days in the desert is our model for Lent.
- Jesus went into the desert immediately after His baptism, and He went there to prepare for His public ministry. Thus, Lent should be a preparation for us.
- Now keep in mind that Jesus choosing to go into the desert for 40 days was not a random amount of time. The number 40, of course, is very symbolic.

- As we look at how the number 40 is used through the Scriptures: for example, Noah's 40 days and 40 nights in the ark, Moses spending 40 days on Mt. Sinai, and the Israelites 40 years in the desert, we can see that 40 is symbolic of purification and preparation.
- Noah spent 40 days and nights in the ark as the world was purified of its sins through the cleansing waters of the flood. Moses was on Mt. Sinai for 40 days and nights to prepare to proclaim God's holy name.
- And the Israelites spent 40 years wandering in the desert before entering the Promised Land in punishment for their sins and to prepare them for the fulfillment of God's promise to them.
- Keep in mind, too, that the normal human pregnancy is 40 weeks. So in the number 40 we can see a symbol for a period of gestation and growth, and purification and preparation.
- Bearing all of this in mind, Holy Mother Church wants us to apply these concepts to our own 40 days of Lent each year in order to fulfill the obligation we have to God through our covenantal relationship with Him.
- In a particular way, we know that the disciplines of Lent are meant to prepare us for the joys of Easter.
- We pray more, fast more, and give more to make reparation for our sins and to be purified of them, to strengthen our wills, and so virtue may be conceived and grow within us so that we will be made worthy of celebrating the Paschal Mystery.
- But ultimately, our practice of praying more, fasting more, and giving more during the 40 days of Lent should prepare us for living more fully and faithfully our covenantal relationship with God.
- We do these things to please God, just as spouses make personal sacrifices in order to serve and show love to one another.
- When we can do this: when we can pray, fast, and give alms as a means of loving God more, then these Lenten practices not only prepare us for Easter, but they prepare us for Eternity!
- Brothers and sisters, we have now entered into the desert of Lent. By God's design, this holy season is to be a time of testing for us, a time of purification and penance. We may even find it to be a time of terrible temptation, as was Jesus' 40 days in the desert.
- But by His grace, we can persevere in praying more, fasting more, and giving more. Yet let us not simply seek to persevere, but to see in our Lenten practices an opportunity to love God more – and thereby be purified of our sins and better prepared for Heaven.