

- With this past Wednesday’s celebration of Ash Wednesday, we’ve now entered into the holy season of Lent, which, at its heart, is a time to more perfectly align ourselves with God and His holy will.
- The preparations we undertake during this holy season are not only meant to help us celebrate Christ’s resurrection at Easter, but they are also a preparation for our own resurrection!
- To go to Heaven means being eternally united with God! That’s what Heaven is: an eternal union, an eternal and beatific vision of God. Being eternally united with God in the beatific vision requires that we be united with Him and His holy will on all levels of our being.
- To be fully and perfectly united with God as we will be in Heaven requires that we think like Him, act like Him, and even look like Him.
- And so Lent is a time of consciously refashioning ourselves so that we do think, act, and look like our Lord. It is the “acceptable time”, the “day of salvation” St. Paul mentions in today’s epistle. And the tools we use are prayer, fasting, and almsgiving.
- To be sure, God is constantly sending us both graces and sufferings that are meant to refashion us and bring us into perfect union with Him. But we still have to cooperate with the process of being conformed to God’s image and likeness.
- And Lent is the special time of year that we redouble our efforts of being conformed to God’s image and likeness by taking on – voluntarily – some sufferings.
- That’s why we give ourselves more fully to the practices of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. We do these things not for their own sake, but so that we might be more perfectly conformed to God and His holy will.
- Remember, my dear friends, that Heaven is open only to those who die in God’s friendship, to those who desire to be united with God, who desire to be like God.
- If we choose to be at odds with God, if we willfully stand in opposition to Him or His commandments in any grave way, we will not be able to enter into Heaven.
- This happens when we persist in mortal sin, or when we refuse to correct our character faults and strive for virtue.
- When confronted with the pain that necessarily comes with conversion, people today will often say things like: “God loves me just the way I am.” We say this as an excuse for not changing sinful behavior.
- While it is true that God loves us as we are, that does not mean He *doesn’t* want us to change and become like Him! God never wills any imperfection in us, let alone sinful behavior.
- To the contrary, Jesus has set a pretty high bar for getting into Heaven, especially if we are people of wealth – which most of us here are when compared to the rest of the world! No one slouches his or her way into the heavenly kingdom.
- Therefore, we must be willing to suffer hardships, to persevere through temptations, to rigorously fast and pray, and to give alms generously. These are the ways that our imperfections are corrected, our virtues are strengthened, and that we gain merit.
- Returning to today’s epistle, St. Paul lists for us an incredible litany of sufferings he and those working with him endured in order to spread the Gospel. He speaks of afflictions, hardships, constraints, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, vigils, and fasts.

- This willingness of St. Paul to undergo such trials is a model for what we must be willing to go through in serving God. Do not kid yourselves: we, too, must be willing to suffer and serve God through all sorts of trials in order to fulfill God's will.
- Moreover, we must even be willing to engage in spiritual warfare for the sake of conforming ourselves to God, just as Jesus did in today's Gospel.
- Every year on the 1st Sunday of Lent, we hear this story of Jesus' temptations in the desert. After 40 days of fasting and prayer, the devil comes to prey upon Him in His hunger and physical weakness.
- Obviously, by proclaiming this Gospel story on the 1st Sunday of Lent, the Church is making a connection between our Lord's 40 days of prayer and fasting in the desert and the 40 days of Lent.
- Just as Christ prepared for His public ministry by 40 days of prayer and fasting, we are to prepare ourselves for a life of holiness during these 40 days of Lent.
- But note well that our Lord's time in the desert wasn't a cozy retreat. Quite the opposite! It was a period of intense spiritual warfare in which He was sorely tried by the devil.
- And in Lent we are not only fighting the world and our own fleshy desires, but we, too, will encounter the evil one and be tried by him.
- But temptations to sin, even those that come directly from the devil, should not *overly* frighten us. For truly, going through this type of experience is part of the process of growing in holiness! Remember: we must be tried in order to be made true!
- So part of being a good soldier for Christ is recognizing that the temptations to sin that form the fabric of our everyday lives, especially those that come from the devil, give us a chance to take a step forward in holiness and deliver a defeat to the great enemy of our souls. But we must be willing to fight!
- The beautiful thing about today's Gospel story is that in allowing Himself to be tempted, Jesus shows us how to overcome the temptations we suffer so that we can be victorious.
- We can imagine how weak Jesus must have felt after praying and fasting for 40 days and nights, but despite the physical weakness He may have felt, there is an interior fortitude that is developed through fasting and prayer.
- By the practice of denying oneself those things that we enjoy through fasting, we learn to master our wills so that we have the courage to turn away from sin – no matter how enticing it might be.
- And by focusing our attention on God through prayer, we learn to submit ourselves to our Lord's humble yoke, and we develop the good habit of trusting in His grace – knowing that it is only by God's grace that we will ever conquer sin and grow in holiness.
- In prayer we come to know God, we come to trust God, and we receive the grace to give ourselves to Him, just as a bride gives herself whole-heartedly to her bridegroom.
- Jesus shows us that, by preparing ourselves through prayer and fasting, God gives us the fortitude to stare down the devil, and see through and counter his lies and half-truths.
- Jesus shows us that, if we humble ourselves before God through these important spiritual practices of prayer and fasting, God gives us the grace to overcome the evil in our lives.
- So, my brothers and sisters, if we want to conform ourselves to God's image and likeness, to conform ourselves to His will, we must begin to grow in holiness by practicing our Lenten disciplines with determination so that God might shower us with His grace.

- And as temptations to sin are presented to us, whether from the world, the flesh, or the devil, let us not receive the grace of God in vain, but may we trust in God's grace and mercy to give us the courage necessary to conquer them.