

- Last Sunday I told the story of how the great mystics, St. Teresa of Ávila and St. John of the Cross, worked together to reform their Carmelite Order.
- In the 16th century when Teresa and John lived, many Carmelites were living in relative ease and comfort rather than the poverty their forebears sought out and so lovingly embraced.
- And with their embrace of ease and comfort and a relaxing of fasting and penance came a sad and sinful relaxation in the moral life, too, which rendered so many Carmelites incapable of making of themselves the gift to God their vocation demanded.
- So, John and Teresa set out to reinstate the rigors of penance and fasting that had been deleted from the original Carmelite Rule over the centuries with the hope that the Carmelites could recover their original ideals and better serve and glorify God.
- For both Teresa and John knew that, without regular fasting and penance, one cannot become detached from sin and all created things in order to be completely attached to God alone.
- Without fasting and penance, no one goes directly to Heaven when they die.
- As we Catholics are obliged to fast and do penance during this holy season of Lent, I preached last Sunday about how to choose a proper mortification.
- I also mentioned last Sunday how important it is to have the proper disposition toward our fasting, doing it to please God and as a sign of our love for Him, rather than fasting and mortifying ourselves primarily for the benefits we can receive from it.
- Lent should be about God, not about us. This should be a time of self-abasement and self-abandonment – a time to forget about what we think we need, so that we can focus more intently upon loving and serving both God and neighbor.
- So, I do hope that you've all chosen appropriate mortifications and are taking them on with the right intention in mind! But because Lent should be about God and how we can best love and serve Him, I also hope you're trying to fast from your sins.
- It's well and good to cut out meals, and to fast from our favorite creature comforts in Lent, but it's most important to fast from sin. Becoming less sinful is really the point of Lent!
- These two forms of fasting: fasting from material goods or creature comforts and fasting from sin go hand in hand. For when we fast from things we love, we gain greater mastery over our wills – strengthening us to say no to sinful temptations, like Christ in our Gospel.
- On the 1st Sunday of every Lent, we hear the story of Jesus fasting in the desert for 40 days, and of the devil tempting Him. Holy Mother Church presents this story at the beginning of Lent as a means of encouraging us to take these 40 days of Lent seriously.
- If we take on appropriate mortifications and do so with integrity and with the intention of rendering ourselves more pleasing to God, we will be strengthened against temptations. We will be stronger in the face of sin's allurements so that we can resist temptations like Christ.
- Generally, in confession most of us confess the same sins over and over again, because our temperaments and the bad habits we've formed make us more vulnerable to certain sins.
- While in our zeal we may wish to conquer all of our habitual sins in a single Lent, most of us will do better to focus on a single sin from which to fast each Lent.
- As you consider what sin to fast from, I encourage you to consider the sin that nags you the most, or the sin you know is most damaging to your soul. Ask yourself: what sin do I regret the most? Or what sin is most humbling and embarrassing for me?

- Pray about it; the Holy Spirit will tell you what sin to work on. And once you've decided on a sin to fast from, formulate a plan to conquer it with God's grace.
- As Americans, most of us are fairly goal-oriented. It's a national trait that we like to push ourselves to achieve something worthwhile.
- Of course, achieving a difficult or serious goal requires that we plan and work diligently. And those who are successful in achieving great goals will tell you that they begin by visualizing themselves accomplishing the goal they've set for themselves.
- Yet as Christians, do we ever visualize ourself in Heaven, which must be our ultimate goal?
- It's true that our salvation is a free gift of God's grace and mercy, and we get to Heaven not by our own efforts. But we still have to cooperate with God's grace in order to receive His mercy. We cannot just go through life as we please and then expect God to give us mercy.
- We have to participate in the work of our redemption by striving for holiness now!
- We are quick to draw up elaborate plans for all sorts of great endeavors, yet we often neglect what should be the most important endeavor of our life: getting to Heaven!
- Lent is our time to really consider our salvation, to visualize what it will be like to be in Heaven, and to make a plan to cooperate with God's grace so that we might get there.
- And as we visualize ourselves in Heaven, we should do so not with any eye to the joy we will experience there, but simply for the way our presence in Heaven will glorify God! Imagine the glory given to God because of the sins that were overcome in your life.
- You see, when we get to Heaven, we'll see the myriad of ways God's grace worked to help us overcome our sins and weaknesses.
- We will share in God's glory for the ways we cooperated with God's grace so that our sins could be healed and conquered. And of course, the more completely our sins are conquered, the more God will be glorified!
- But it all begins with us doing all we can to fight our sins so that they might be rooted out of our lives. We have to do our part now.
- For many of us, our greatest and most damaging sin is something deeply habituated that's not easily conquered, and it can seem daunting even to try – especially if we've tried and failed numerous times in the past. So, for starters, don't dwell on past failures; look only at today.
- Make a solemn promise to God to avoid that sin just for today, and not for the whole of Lent. Just do it day by day, for you'll have a much greater chance of success if you only focus on today, and not on the whole 40 days of Lent. Renew your promise daily.
- Next, ask God for the grace to keep your solemn promise each day. Humble yourself before Him; acknowledge your need for His grace to overcome your sin. Ask God to strengthen you to keep your solemn promise simply in order to please Him.
- When moments of temptation come – and they surely will – remind yourself of your solemn promise and how awful it would be to break such a promise to God. And think of the great glory you are giving to God by cooperating with His grace to resist the temptation.
- Lastly, choose a patron saint to accompany you through Lent, perhaps a saint who suffered with the same vice. Ask the saint to help you cooperate with God's grace so that your sin can be conquered.
- My friends, Lent is what we make of it. It can be a time in which we give great glory to God and enjoy the benefits of His grace, but only if we take fasting seriously. May we fast well, most especially from sin, and trust that God will give us His grace and mercy in abundance.