

- In the ancient calendar of the Church, today is known as Quinquagesima Sunday, which is the last of a triptych of Sundays that prepares us for the penitential season of Lent.
- This preparatory period began two Sundays ago with Septuagesima Sunday. *Septuagesima* literally means “70th,” a symbolic reference to the number of days before Easter. Last Sunday was *Sexagesima Sunday* (“60th”), and then today is *Quinquagesima Sunday* (“50th”).
- And, of course, on Ash Wednesday we will formally enter into Lent, which in Latin is called: *Quadragesima*, which means “40th” – referring to the 40 days of Lent.
- These pre-Lenten Sundays that we began in the Latin Mass a couple of weeks ago are meant to prepare us for the discipline of Lent, and they also mark a period of transition from the glories of the Christmas Season and the Season after the Epiphany to the more solemn and yet so very necessary penitential season of Lent.
- As we prepare to enter into Lent this week, we are encouraged by our readings to practice the virtue of charity. And this makes perfect sense, for Lent is a time to become more like Christ, and Christ Jesus is Love Incarnate.
- Truly, learning to love as our Lord loves is how we are perfected in this life so that we might be prepared for eternal union with Him in Heaven.
- So, what does loving like Christ look like? Well, when it comes to understanding authentic, Christian love, we must first turn to St. Paul’s magnificent primer on this topic found in the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians.
- It is here that St. Paul teaches us the essential qualities of the virtue of charity. He tells us: *Love is patient, love is kind. It is not jealous, [love] is not pompous, it is not inflated, it is not rude, it does not seek its own interests, it is not quick-tempered, it does not brood over injury, it does not rejoice over wrongdoing but rejoices with the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails.*
- That’s a lot to take in, and I certainly recommend that you meditate on this important chapter of Scripture.
- And furthermore, in detailing all of these qualities of charity, St. Paul also reminds us that if our good actions are not done with authentic love, then they ring hollow and lack integrity. Love must be what motivates us as Christians.
- Moreover, Jesus tells us in His Sermon on the Mount today that our exercise of the virtue of charity – if it is to be truly Christ-like – must extend even to our enemies.
- Even when people are hurting us or persecuting us, we must look beyond their sins and injustices against us so that we can enter into their suffering with them.
- Just as we must look beyond the bread and wine we receive at Holy Communion to see our Lord present in the Eucharist, so, too, must we look with the eyes of faith beyond the faults and failings of others to see the goodness present in them.
- When we can do that, when we are able to love even our enemies as our Lord counsels us to do, that is when our love becomes God-like. It is then that we really begin to turn away from ourselves and begin living our lives selflessly.
- This brings us to the question of what Lenten penances we should undertake. As I said, Lent is a time for us to become more Christ-like, and our penances should aid this process.
- Fasting and sacrifice strengthen our will and free us from inordinate attachments so that we can become more selfless and love God and neighbor better.

- With this in mind, there are a couple of questions we can ask to help us determine a proper Lenten penance.
- The first question: what keeps you from God? In other words, do you have any idols in your life? Is there something or someone that you love more than God? Or is there something that keeps you from spending as much time with God as you should?
- The second question: what creature comforts would you miss most if you gave them up? In other words, where do you turn for consolation when you've had a long day or a bad day?
- The point of these questions is to uncover your attachments. What are the things that we think we cannot live without? Your penance should pinch a bit.
- But even more important than choosing a mortification is having the right attitude in taking on our mortification. Our mortifications should not be a challenge to conquer or goal to achieve, but rather a means for us to make of ourselves a gift to God.
- You see, Lent isn't a time of fasting and penance for the sake of fasting and doing penance. If we focus too much on our fasting, penance, and the benefits we derive from them, Lent can become too much about us, when it should be about God!
- As St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, whatever we do, we should do it for the glory of God. This includes growing in holiness. (Cf. 1 Cor 10:31)
- Yet we strive for holiness as Christians not just because we want the glory of becoming saints, but primarily because our holiness gives glory to God! So, whatever mortifications we take on should be done as a means of loving and serving God.
- There has to be a charitable intention in our mortification. At the heart of our mortification must be the determination to love God and others, not the determination to simply conquer ourselves. As St. Paul says, if we do not have love, we are nothing!
- So, as we prepare for Lent, pick mortifications that really pinch you. Be determined and resolute in your Lenten promises. But most importantly, embrace your Lenten disciplines with a loving desire to please and glorify God.
- Embrace your Lenten sacrifices as a means of becoming more authentically charitable.
- Truly, my brothers and sisters, the virtue of charity, love, is the measure by which we will be judged on Judgment Day. When at the end of our lives we see God face to face, the overarching question He will ask us is this: "How well did you love me?"
- This is because being in Heaven requires a capacity to love, for God is Love, and Heaven is nothing more than being perfectly united with God, Who is Love, for all eternity.
- The greater our capacity to love while we live on earth, the greater our joy will be in Heaven – and the greater our glory will be as well.
- And remember, our love for God is not measured by warm feelings or sentiments. Our love for God is best measured by obedience to His will, by whole-heartedly accepting, obeying, and loving His commandments; and by our ability to be charitable even to our enemies.
- May this Lent truly be a time of transformation for us all, a time in which the virtue of charity may become more deeply rooted within us, a time in which we all become a little more Christ-like. Amen!