

## 1<sup>st</sup> SUNDAY OF LENT – A (February 26, 2023)

First, I want to let you know about our Lenten devotions for this year: as was the case last year, we will have a Eucharistic Holy Hour on the next five Fridays beginning at 5:30 p.m. in each of our five cluster parishes—beginning this coming Friday, March 3, in Riceville. We will begin each of those Hours with exposition of the Blessed Sacrament, followed by the Stations of the Cross. There will then be time for silent prayer; during that time I'll be available for confessions. We will then conclude with Benediction at 6:30 pm. The schedule for the remaining Fridays of Lent are on our cluster website and will be in the next few bulletins.

Even if our winter storm messed up our Ash Wednesday Mass schedule, we have indeed begun our annual Lenten observance once again. You know I've been speaking a lot about God calling us to a daily, deeper conversion and holiness as we rely on his grace and mercy. And Lent reminds us why we need that mercy: because of the reality of sin. Our culture today seems almost allergic to the very idea of sin, thinking that it's so 'intolerant' or 'judgmental'. The most we might hear is that I 'made a mistake' or acted 'inappropriately'.

But sin is real, like it or not, and it involves every last one of us. Sin is real, it exists because of the reality that we sometimes freely choose to say 'no' to the God who loves us so much that he wants us to avoid what harms our relationship with him and others. The Catechism reminds us that sin 'is an abuse of the freedom that God gives' us (n. 387). Because we freely choose to sin, we need to assume responsibility for our sins—and that is what Lent is all about.

But it sure is easy for us to try to avoid that responsibility, to 'pass the buck'. That's been going on since the beginning of human history. Our reading from Genesis tells the familiar story of the first man and woman disobeying God by eating what was forbidden them. If we go to the next few verses, we read about God confronting them with their disobedience. And their response? Talk about 'passing the buck'! God said to the man "you have eaten that which I forbade you to eat", and his response: "the woman you put here gave me its fruit, so I ate it." God then confronted the woman, whose response was almost as laughable: "the serpent tricked me, so I ate it." See what I mean? "Don't blame me—she made me do it!" "Don't blame me—the serpent made me do it!" Some of you my age and older may remember Flip Wilson, a comedian who was popular back in the 1960's and '70's. One of his funniest characters was Geraldine whose trademark line (delivered with a high, raspy voice that I won't try to imitate) was always: "the devil made me do it!" Right out of the book of Genesis!

Sin has been with us from the very beginning of human history. That first sin affected not only our first parents, but all their descendants as well—every one of us is born into a state marked by the absence of that complete justice and holiness with which God created the first man and woman. That absence is what we call original sin, and it has affected everyone in history...except, of course Jesus and his blessed Mother who God preserved from that stain of original sin—what we call the Immaculate Conception.

Original sin is one of those of our Catholic beliefs about which there is still much confusion. Contrary to how some perceive it, being born in a state of original sin does not mean that a newborn, an infant, is guilty of personal sin. A baby, of course, does not have the capacity or

ability to choose to do wrong or evil—that only comes about in later years. Rather, original sin is simply the state of the human race whose relationship with God was wounded—not destroyed, but wounded-by that first sin of disobedience. And if we're honest with ourselves, we realize that the effects of original sin are all around us—in fact, it has been said that original sin is that Catholic doctrine or belief for which there is the most empirical evidence. Check out the headlines—war, terrorism, crime, abuse, immorality, injustice, and everything else: who can deny that there is something fundamentally out of sync within ourselves?

Indeed—who can deny the conflicts within the heart, soul and mind of every one of us? We know too well the weakness of human nature and how easy it is to say 'yes' to the temptations that surround us. Temptation itself is not sin; even Jesus himself experienced that reality as we heard in the gospel. But Jesus resisted, he said 'no' to the devil's attempts to turn him against the love and the will of his Father. We, on the other hand, so freely and so often say 'yes' to those temptations...even though we know better. Even St. Paul knew that sad fact; elsewhere in his letter to the Romans he said "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate." We all identify with that reality. That battle within ourselves is precisely the legacy of original sin—even if its stain is removed by baptism, its effects remain within us.

Sin is real, it's serious business, and we have to face it head on if we really want to grow in holiness. Fortunately, we have the Son of God—Jesus—who came to us to help and strengthen us to say 'no' to sin so as to say a stronger 'yes' to him. In his encounter with the devil in the desert, Jesus shows his complete power over the devil and his temptations. May this season of Lent, this time of special grace, be a time to renew our resolve to turn back more fully to Jesus and to his gospel in all the ways we each need.