

Homily - Fifth Sunday of Lent

Here's a question to ponder: what is the point of Lent?

Why have we been on this penitential journey?

What, if we had to summarize it in a single word, or theme, would you say is the most important thing for us to take away from this experience?

You may have some idea already, but as we draw near to the end of this season, it seems fitting that we reflect on the theme given to us in the words of the Church herself.

Listen carefully to this prayer, which may sound familiar to you:

“By your help, we beseech you, Lord our God, may we walk eagerly in **that same charity** with which, out of love for the world, your Son handed himself over to death. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God forever and ever. Amen.”

The Church gives us that text which we just heard as the Collect, or opening prayer, of this Mass for this Fifth week of the Lenten season.

That prayer, in a line, reveals what we might think of as the core of our spiritual journey throughout this time, a journey which approaches its conclusion as we look forward to the upcoming days of Holy Week.

Charity. The same charity, as the prayer says, which Christ himself lives out perfectly in offering himself for us on the Cross.

Again, when we talk about Charity in its Christian sense as a virtue, we're talking about love - authentic love, purified of every kind of selfishness or superficiality.

The Catechism sums it up this way: “Charity is the theological virtue by which we love God above all things for his own sake, and our neighbor as ourselves for the love of God.”

Love of God and neighbor - the two great commandments. As the Catechism further explains, “By loving one another, the disciples imitate the love of Jesus which they themselves receive.”

Love might not feel like a very Lenten word, but if you think about the larger purpose of the season, I would argue that love, properly understood, is indeed the entire point of this journey.

Prayer renews our hearts in love.

Fasting purifies our attachments to love more freely.

Almsgiving puts that love into action in the service of our neighbor.

This is the kind of love Saint Paul famously writes about in his first letter to the Corinthians, in that passage we hear in nearly every wedding - that kind of love without which all other spiritual gifts are meaningless.

As we approach the end of Lent, it’s good for us to stop and look back on this past month, and reflect on that question: where have we grown in love in this sacred time?

Where have we struggled or made progress?

Where have we encountered the Lord in unexpected places?

For some of us, we may feel like we haven’t made as much progress as we wanted to.

If that's how you feel, I have just one piece of encouragement: finish strong!

It's more common than you realize that whether you're on retreat, or in a time of prayer, it's crucial that we remain faithful to the end, as best as we're able, because very often the greatest graces only come to us in the final days and hours.

It may be that the Lord has the best gifts still waiting for you.

If it *has* been a powerful time of grace, give thanks for that.

Write down and make note of the beautiful ways God has been moving and acting in your life so that you won't take them for granted, or fall back into old habits when Easter arrives.

Even though it's a season of feasting, Easter shouldn't be a time where we let everything fall apart.

Instead, think of it as a time to celebrate the progress and recommit to the path on which the Lord has placed us.

And, as our prayer today reminds us, to do that we need to keep growing in charity - in love.

Saint Francis de Sales, one of the most practical and pragmatic of the Doctors of the Church, wrote in his letters of spiritual direction that alongside the foundational virtue of humility, we can think of charity as being like a great chain that drags all the other virtues along behind it.

Or to put it another way, when we truly love something, we're willing and able to shape the rest of our lives around it.

Sacrifices become easier.

Decisions become simpler.

Priorities become clearer, all because we know what we are meant to do and how we are meant to serve and worship.

When God is placed at the center, everything else just makes more sense.

And most of all, we're willing to fight tooth and nail to preserve those relationships, most of all our relationship with God, and to resist sin with determination and courage.

Chances are, Lent has helped us recognize places where we still need to grow into that kind of love.

Pray with that as we approach Holy Week and begin our meditation on the Lord's Passion and Death.

How is he inviting us into that mystery, and where can we unite our own weakness with him in his Crucifixion?

Let's offer these places in our hearts to him in this Eucharist, and pray that he will make our hearts like his, willing to journey with him all the way even to the foot of the Cross itself.