

I was at Notre Dame Academy the other day for the school Mass, and glanced at IHM's bulletin to see the Mass intention for that day. Right above that, I saw Fr. John's bulletin article, and he described the season of Lent as a time when the whole Church goes on a forty-day retreat together. That's a beautiful image. While we physically carry on with our day-to-day lives, spiritually we are on retreat, with a greater focus than usual on our life as disciples of Christ.

Here at St. Gabriel's during this forty-day retreat, we take this season of Lent to particularly focus on our life of prayer. You should be receiving in the mail a brochure on our prayer ministries, speaking about the different ways we can make prayer a part of our lives. It's easy to find this topic of prayer somewhat intimidating. We know we are supposed to pray, we know that it is a part of discipleship, but what if we don't know how? What if we find it difficult? We might think we're the only one, that there's something wrong with us if prayer doesn't come naturally or easy to us, and be embarrassed to admit that and ask for help. You're not the only one – far from it – and the parish is here, to help all of us develop a growing life of prayer.

One thing to understand at the outset is that we have to *learn* how to pray, primarily because of original sin and our fallen nature. God's intention, the way it was in the very beginning, was for us to be in perfect communion with Him, a communion that was easy, intimate. This is expressed with the beautiful imagery of God walking

through the garden of Eden at the breezy time of day, and asking Adam and Eve why they hid themselves when they heard Him coming. It is painful to consider that that is what we lost when we introduced sin into the world, that we were created to be so naturally close to God that talking to Him was like talking to a friend while on a walk. But with our sin, we created a distance between ourselves and God, and now there's a whole discussion in the catechism called the *struggle* of prayer.

But we still have that desire to be close to God within us, even if we can't identify it as such, we were created to be in that kind of relationship with Him. But we can't see God with our eyes, we can't hear His voice with our ears. We have to learn to *see* Him with the eyes of faith, we have to learn to recognize His *voice* speaking to our hearts, and that's a kind of communication that doesn't happen on its own as we grow up, like it did when we said our first word or took our first step. It's something we have to learn.

And in this fallen world, there are plenty of distractions that can keep us from learning. The world is full of temptations that try to keep our focus here, on what we can see and touch: pleasures that we want to indulge in, honor and esteem we want from the people around us, tempting us to put all of our energy into worldly comfort and achievements. *That* is now our natural inclination, in this fallen human state, so we have to learn to fight that and focus on the relationship that really matters.

Christ showed us the way; just look at today's gospel. The enemy tempted him to turn away from doing the Father's will and focus on himself – feeding his bodily hunger after forty days of fasting, being served by the angels, ruling over all the kingdoms of the world. Notice that Christ, in fact, did have a claim on all these things. He is the Lord of all creation, so he did have the power and the rightful claim to turn stones into bread if he was hungry, to be served by the angels he created, to rule over all the kingdoms of the earth – he is Christ the King. But he wasn't going to fall for the enemy's tricks the way our first parents did in the garden; he wasn't going to put any distance between himself and his heavenly Father by not putting his Father's will above all else.

There are a few things I'd like to encourage us all to do during this season of Lent to help us keep our focus on our relationship with God. During this season, attendance at daily Mass, Tuesday through Saturday, tends to go up, at least when it's not below zero outside. If you have not already, I'd like to encourage you to make celebrating Mass at least once during the week a part of your Lenten practice. Our morning Mass times here might not work with your schedule – that's fine, a benefit of living in the metro area with many parishes means finding a time that works for us a little easier. One thing we don't have many options with in this area, though, is a daily Mass in the late afternoon/early evening. It's been on my heart recently to move our daily Mass time to around 5:00pm with confession afterwards,

but that's a decision for a later date, and I invite you to let me know what you think about that.

Another thing I'd like to encourage us all to do is make celebrating the Stations of the Cross a part of our prayer life. If we lived near the Holy Land, we could literally walk in the footsteps of Jesus on his way to the cross, but we don't. Instead, we do so spiritually in our hearts by praying the stations. We celebrate them communally during Lent on Fridays at 7:00pm, but you can also do so on your own, either here at church or in your home. If that's what you'd like to do, please feel free to take one of the booklets home with you, the parish can always buy more.

And I'd like to encourage you to be intentional about making a pledge to God of how you'll try to develop your prayer life this upcoming year. We offer a number of ministries here at the parish that are designed specifically to help you develop a habit of prayer, and we will again have our Prayer Fair in two weeks so you can learn more about them and perhaps give them a try. In that brochure that I mentioned, there is also a pledge card, to put down in writing what step you intend to take in developing your life of prayer – not just for the season of Lent, but for this year. You'll be invited to bring those cards back and bring them to the foot of the altar and make them part of Christ's offering in the Eucharist. Let's make the most of this retreat that we are all on together, and use this holy season as a chance to deepen our relationship with our heavenly Father.