

“Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil. He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards, he was hungry” (Matthew 4:1-2).

Fasting and penance have been a vital part of our faith from the very beginning, as seen in Jesus’ own forty day fast. Right at the beginning of his public life, immediately following his baptism, Jesus marches into the desert to do battle with Satan and his many temptations. Jesus does this as a sort of spiritual boot camp, a forty day spiritual exercise regimen to focus his mind and strengthen his will on God’s kingdom alone. By facing down the relatively minor temptation of a grumbling stomach, Jesus prepares himself to face the much greater and deadlier temptations to come in his public ministry, attempts by the enemy to distract him from his purpose and to lead him away from God’s kingdom. Jesus forty days of penance enable him to carry out his divine mission, all the way to the end.

And so does ours. March 1<sup>st</sup> is Ash Wednesday and the beginning of our annual forty days of penance that we call Lent. This spiritual boot camp helps prepare us to face the many temptations that we encounter throughout the year with strong faith and a clear focus on what really matters, God’s kingdom. By setting our distractions aside for forty days and strengthening our will through fasting and abstinence, we are enabled to overcome whatever the enemy may throw at us in his quest to get us off the narrow way of Christ.

While individually we are encouraged to do many acts of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving during Lent, such as the traditional practice of giving up something that we enjoy, the real mark of the season is the communal penance that we do, those acts of prayer and fasting that we do together as the People of God, the Church. This includes fasting on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday for those between the ages of 18 and 59 and abstinence from meat on those days, as well as every Friday during Lent, for all people 14 and older. The Catholic fast requires that we eat only one full meal on that day, though we may also eat two lighter meals. It is also important to note that those who are sick or who need to eat for medical reasons (e.g. they must have food with their medication) are not obliged to fast. Such persons are encouraged to substitute another form of penance on fast days.

Let us enter our forty days of penance together as Christ did, with faith and determination, and may our Lenten experience strengthen us for our mission to God’s kingdom.