

My Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

I am grateful to my Brother Priests for allowing me to preach this homily for the First Sunday of Lent in 2023. We have entered Lent this year emerging with new spirit from the ravages of the Coronavirus Pandemic, as our Diocesan Church spiritually prepares for our June celebration of the Fortieth Anniversary of the founding of the diocese under the patronage of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, and as the Church in the United States is in the midst of a Eucharistic Revival. We have embarked upon our Lenten Pilgrimage with focus on the spiritual disciplines of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving.

Your participation in the Diocesan Eucharistic Revival with focus on prayer to the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the Immaculate Heart of Mary has been edifying to me personally, to your Pastor, and to one another. I encourage all of us as the Church of Lubbock to recommit ourselves to such prayer with renewed vigor during this season of Lent. In today's Gospel we see Jesus led into the desert by the Spirit where he fasted for forty days and forty nights.

Why did Jesus fast? Why did the Son of God take on our humanity? Why did Jesus, without sin, become like us in all things but sin, and endure life, temptation, and even death? For humanity! For us! For you and for me! Why?

Because of sin in the world and experienced in our own lives. Our First Reading sets forth for us an epic story of sin's origin, its entrance into human experience. It's a sad story. It's a pitiful story. But it is very real. It is our story too. Sin is part of our human experience. Sin is part of my life, and it is part of your life. It is obvious in a specific way in the Church and our world today. Adam and Eve became alienated from God because of their pride in which they chose their way, they chose themselves, over God's plan for them. We live in a time today where people choose to be alienated from one another in terrible, scandalous ways. Division and polarization are all around us. At the root of this division is self-centeredness. This self-centered attitude gets lived out in selfish behaviors. And our focus on self ends up taking the form of xenophobia – a fear of others, a fear of everything, a fear that makes us want to crawl into our shell of personal isolation. The spiritual practice of fasting, which is a very traditional part of our Lenten Journey, is intended to purify our sinful nature; it is intended as a discipline

which seeks to draw us back to the things that really matter in life. Sin distracts us from such basic good which we are intended to pursue according to God's plan.

Even as we strive to grow in our spiritual life, the reality of temptation assails us. It happened to Jesus in the desert as we heard so clearly in today's Gospel. Our Lenten discipline of fasting, as well as prayer and almsgiving, are intended to help ward off temptations in our lives.

In his Letter to the Romans, St. Paul tells us that Christ came to reverse the alienation which sin has brought about. Christ came for the sake of unity – unity with God and unity with one another. That unity begins in the domestic church of your homes. It needs to be part of the community of faith. We must strive for unity in the Church and even in our secular society, including unity among the family of nations.

Impetus for that unity is the work of God's grace. And God's grace is readily available to us in every celebration of the Eucharist. At the Eucharist we partake of one Bread, and we are enabled to be one Body, the Body of Christ his Church. We receive the Body of Christ and we become what we receive, the Body of Christ.

The unity of that Body is desperately needed today, to reverse the polarization and division which exist around us. God's grace is made available to us in the Eucharist to avoid the temptation to self-centeredness and selfish behaviors, and serves as spiritual remedy for the psychological malaise of xenophobia which afflicts our society today.

Our Lenten discipline of almsgiving can be an expression of our desire for unity. When we give alms, we act on behalf of others in concrete ways, helping to fulfill needs which some people are simply unable to fulfill themselves. As a Lenten almsgiving opportunity, I once again invite you to participate in our Annual Catholic Offering for Ministries.

The Ministries Offering is a stewardship opportunity through which you can work on behalf of the unity of our Diocesan Church. Through the Offering we look beyond our self-centeredness and xenophobia, as we offer assistance to our friends, our brothers and sisters in Christ, our fellow human beings. Your pledge and contribution to the Annual Catholic Offering for Ministries will benefit the ministries which are so essential on behalf of our Diocesan Church.

A pledge of your family's generous support of the Ministries Offering will be used entirely in support of the ministries of the Diocese. Your gift for fiscal year 2023-2024 which will begin in July will allow the Church of the Diocese of Lubbock to minister, to serve, to work to satisfy some of the needs which surfaced during the Synod Listening Sessions which I facilitated last Spring.

The top priority which surfaced was the need for more ministry to young adults and youth in the diocese. Next year's budget includes addition of another half-time position in that office which has made great strides forward on behalf of the Young Church in the past year. Another priority which surfaced was the need to support marriage and family life. The office for ministry to marriages and family life has benefitted in the last year by receiving more attention and more resources put forth in that direction. Faith Formation programs throughout the Diocese continue to benefit from the curriculum and catechist training efforts that have been put forth since the Pandemic shutdown. And I continue to be convinced that whole family faith formation is the only viable approach to the needed faith formation of our young people and their parents. Having seminarians in our Propadeutic Seminary in Plainview has been a boon to our vocation ministry in the Diocese – a ministry which is scheduled to present two men for Ordination to the Priesthood on June 3. And your support of the Annual Catholic Offering for Ministries will continue to assist parishes in need of sustenance because they simply cannot pay their bills. And there are individuals and families in the Diocese who also benefit from charitable support provided by diocesan ministries.

I am asking that your family, as generous stewards, make a sacrificial offering as a form of almsgiving by pledging to our Annual Catholic Offering for Ministries for the coming fiscal year. The Diocesan goal for this year is the same as last year, one million, three hundred thousand dollars. Remember that your parish's goal for the Ministries Offering is not a binding assessment on your parish. This is an opportunity for you to support the One Body which we are as a Diocesan Church. I sincerely ask you to help me serve the people of the Diocese of Lubbock through the ministries that are associated with my own episcopal ministry.

I invite your parish to conduct the process of pledging to the Annual Catholic Offering for Ministries in the manner most effective for your parish. May this Lenten Season serve to remind us that we are all members of the One Body of Christ. And what you do here week after week, partaking of the One Bread, makes us that one Body of Christ. And may this special Year of Eucharistic Revival, and special prayer to the Immaculate Heart of Mary for our Diocese, continue to be a source of renewal and new life for you, for your families, for all of us. God bless you!