

There's an old saying that the easiest way to overcome temptation is to give in. Lent is a time when traditionally we take on some spiritual exercise for the sake of penance. It's like we create temptation. We abstain from meat on Fridays in lent, but it's tempting to cave in at the local burger stand. Or we decide to do something more--say some prayers, help out a neighbor, or come to church. But it's still tempting to stay in bed and relax at home instead. As if we don't have enough temptation in our lives already, lent seems determined to add more. No wonder the easiest way to overcome temptation is to give in.

In the earliest days of the church, the temptation we were most concerned about had nothing to do with meat, chocolates, or sex. I'm not even sure if they had chocolates in the early days of the church. I know they had the other two. But the temptation we were most concerned about had to do with catechumens. We were afraid someone would tempt them away from their faith.

It was for this reason that we created lent in the first place. Lent became a six-week spiritual training program--boot camp for would-be Christians. Today in the catechumenate we call it the period of purification and enlightenment. This is the time for catechumens to go on retreat, to purify their behaviors and to enlighten their minds. The next several weeks we will celebrate special rituals at this Mass to pray for our catechumens as they prepare to join our church at Easter. In this way we help them face temptation; that's our number one concern.

This is why lent always begins with the Gospel we hear today, the temptation of Christ. Even Jesus faced temptation. During his forty day retreat in the desert he was tempted in every way. This Gospel sends a message that anyone can be tempted. And what's surprising is that the gravest temptations came to Jesus when he was on retreat, when he was at prayer. You would think that in this time of holiness, he'd be far from sin and temptation. Temptation can be strongest when we are most spiritual--while we pray, in the parking lot after Mass, taking care of the sick, pledging money to charity, preparing to be baptized, or making a good lenten resolution. In holy times, in good times--that's when temptation will come.

So why does lent create more temptation when it's already hard not to give in? Lenten penance provides spiritual discipline. It builds character. If we can keep our fast or say our prayers for six weeks of the year, we'll fight every temptation better all year round.