

The topic for today is "sin". Not "how to do it"--I hope we're all experts by now--but "where and how to face it."

Temptation flourishes. It's like salt on your car in a Kansas City winter. Try as you do to keep it out of your life, it keeps coming back. I have so much salt on my car that people with high blood pressure won't ride with me any more. Every time we pray the Lord's Prayer we beg God to lead us not into temptation. But temptation is the street we live on. It's our address. And it can lead the unsuspecting into sin.

It's not surprising that temptation finds us. It finds everyone. It even found Jesus. Mark says Jesus ~~went~~<sup>led</sup> to the desert for forty days and Satan tempted Him there. He was with wild beasts and angels waited on Him. The desert is a place of unlimited freedom--vast open distances and far-reaching horizons. But the desert is also a place of insecurity, poverty, thirst, and hunger. It offers the sacred and the profane, ecstatic visions, deceitful mirages. A place to meet God and a place to meet the devil.

Our forty days of Lent are like Jesus' forty days in the desert. We will sacrifice, we will fast, we will pray. We will be tempted, and we will see God. For forty days we create a desert to live <sup>through</sup> the rest of the year ~~more carefully~~ in the desert of our temptations. Lent is like a virus we inject into our system to ~~help~~ ward off the disease. It's dangerous entering Lent, because the temptation to sin grows stronger with our desire to do good.

This week Pope John Paul II signed a new papal encyclical, *Sollicitudo rei socialis*. It's about the concern the Church feels for society. John Paul accuses the superpowers of East and West of an exaggerated need for security which causes a global economic imbalance. In the United States, we're so accustomed to exalting the benefits of capitalism over those of communism we forget the irony an outside party sees in an affluent capitalistic state which cannot eradicate its own problems of poverty, joblessness, and the homeless. Part of the desert we live in is affluence. In an affluent environment many are the opportunities which tempt us to sin.

Our desert this Lent may resemble a shopping mall more than a wasteland. As the devil tempted Jesus, so he will tempt us, to squander things, to trivialize sexual relationships, to ignore the elderly, to kill the unborn without a thought. In the movie *Dirty Dancing*, which produced some of the most exciting pop music of the year, we meet a young heroine who gains credibility with her peers when she arranges an abortion for one of them. The film praises the teenager who got herself accepted, without questioning the morality of her decision, without treating the delicate issue of the emotional scars women face after abortion.

It's a desert out there, it's often a moral wasteland we live in. It requires extraordinary strength to be faithful to Christian values in a post-Christian society. None of us has that strength. It comes from God alone. But God will share it with those who seek him in the desert this Lent.