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First Sunday of Lent, cycle C

By [Don L. Fischer](#)

SCRIPTURE: Deuteronomy 26:4-10; Romans 10:8-13; Luke 4:1-13

On the First Sunday of Lent, we are reminded that this season is dedicated to transformation. We are reminded — as we were on Ash Wednesday — that we are human: "Remember man, that thou art dust, and unto dust thou shalt return." This is a statement taken from the Old Testament, the book of Genesis, when Adam and Eve had sinned. They had inflated their position with God. They had decided it was a good idea to be like God. They didn't want to just remain human and dependent on God. They lost this relationship, this harmony that was their inheritance. As they were leaving the garden, God said many things to Adam and Eve. He implied that they would have to deal with pain and suffering and the work of the world. They would have to till the soil and feel the urge and pull of sexual desire inside of them. All of these things that are so basically human are things Adam and Eve would now experience. God said to Adam: "Remember that you are dust. Remember that you are human. It's your humanity that you need to return to. You need to get back into that disposition of recognizing how much you need me, and how much the relationship I want to have with you is one where you are dependent on me. You are not independent. You are not autonomous. You are not equal to me."

It's fascinating to me that the human spirit, which is an incredible gift God has given to us, has this dimension to it which enables it to imagine a lot of things. One of the things it can imagine is that its power is awesome — and it is. But it's not enough. I think the fact that we are invited to remain close to our humanity is that we are invited to remain close to the simple truth that we are in something, called life, and it is over our heads. We can do extraordinary things. We are phenomenal creatures; our minds are amazing for what they can discover and figure out. It's true that we as human beings have the capacity to understand a lot of things. In fact, we are living in an explosion of information. We know so much. But isn't it interesting that information is not necessarily something that puts us in touch with the kingdom? Information often puts us in touch with the capacity the human spirit has to accomplish things. It's very important for us to remember that information is one thing; transformation is another. Information is something we can work on and discover, and the human ego is great at finding it. The human ego is filled with curiosity. We have the tools available to us now that no generation in the history of the world has ever had to find out things. But it doesn't necessarily make the world better, in the sense of the way in which we use information. Information can be used for anything. I

think a lot of people are nervous about the kinds of things we are discovering, about the kind of things we are capable of doing. Whenever those things get real close to what we sense God and only God is supposed to do, a lot of us get nervous. I think there's good reason for that. The tradition we belong to, the gut instinct when we really get in touch with our soul, is that we don't have enough wisdom (which is different from information!) to necessarily handle the tough decisions, the hard issues, the kinds of things that are beyond our comprehension.

During the season of Lent, we are involved in a work in which we are invited to open ourselves up to the mystery of transformation. The whole notion of this season of Lent is about growth and change. The word Lent means "spring," a time of growth and transformation. Lent is not just about growth in a human sense. It's about spiritual growth. It's about wisdom. It's about opening ourselves up to the reality that bottom line, in our Judeo-Christian tradition, God has created us human. We are limited, unable to do all he has asked us to do. God offers us his partnership, this Spirit, this anointing that is our inheritance. God wants to anoint us, and that empowers us. We work with the human spirit and the divine spirit — and together we can accomplish extraordinary things. We have a figure, a living example of what this looks like. What does it look like to see a human spirit, fully developed, that is also filled with divine spirit? And it understands the balance between the two. That was the figure of Jesus. And so, we have this model. What a terrible thing we do to this model when we try to oversimplify it or try to turn it into something that is a caricature! Like Jesus was this perfect figure, that everywhere he walked there were angels' voices. I remember as a child going to those religious movies where you never saw the face of Jesus. It was always like you saw the back of his head. Every time, Jesus walked into a place, jaws dropped. Angels' voices filled the theater. It was like, "Whoa, this guy was just incredible." I bet you that if you walked up to Jesus or bumped into him in the temple you would probably say, "Hmm, that's an interesting person," and then walk on. I don't think people would respond in such a dramatic way because even today I don't see that happening. There aren't many people who walk around, and everybody falls in front of them. We have the inheritance of being like Jesus; we are like him.

What does a human being look like who has truly entered into this place called the kingdom? Let's look at the readings today, because they help establish the setting for this season focused on transformation. They set some things in front of us that are important for us to contemplate. The first is the Paschal Mystery. This is what Lent is trying to invite us into. We are transformed by entering into the Paschal Mystery. The Paschal Mystery is that strange experience in our tradition. We can see it experienced in the lives of all those who are engaged in salvation history. It goes something like this: We start off, and we are in this wonderful, innocent place. We go from this innocent place to a place of awareness. We become informed. The ego gets stretched. It stands up and says, "Whoa, this is pretty exciting, the things I am able to accomplish." And then, we go for it. We use our own energy and understanding to try to accomplish the things that God has asked us to accomplish. We get out there, and we think we are making it — and we fall flat on our face. Then the enemies take us over. We lose everything. We fall down. Then, we rise again, when we recognize, "I can't do this on my own." When we rise, we are completely different. That is the Paschal Mystery. We start off in a kind of neutral position. We go in a direction that is too inflated. We fall down, and then we start up again. Except for the fact that when we start up again, we are not the same. Look at the reading from Deuteronomy. It's a description of the Israelite community, a tiny beginning, completely insignificant. A little wandering tribe. They get into a situation and become a great nation.

All of a sudden, slavery comes into their lives. This is a wonderful image of every kind of addiction, every kind of sin there is. We end up giving ourselves over to a way of life that is enslaving. Whatever it is, we end up working and struggling and doing things — and we are somehow trapped in something that is effective. But we are not free. We are not full. We are not complete. We are missing something. Into that enclosed, imprisoned sense comes a Spirit. Like Moses the prophet. God calls Moses and tells him, “I want my people to be free.” Then they go through this excruciating process of trying to get free. They finally make it. Once they get free, it’s not over.

Once they understand they have this wonderful thing called divine spirit entering into their history that is going to change everything, the Israelite people have got to learn to deal with that power. Off these people go, passing through the Red Sea, out into the desert. They will then get to the promised land. What is the desert, other than the place of being tested? The place of growing. The place of understanding how this extraordinary power can work with us. The minute that extraordinary power is given, we get confused on how to use it. The ego, which is the part of us that is the human spirit, always wants to say, “Wow, I’ve got all of this power.” I imagine this is sort of like money. If you have a lot of money, you say, “I wonder what I can do with all of this. I have \$6 million. What will I do with \$6 million.” I would say most of us — and I would put myself at the front of this list — would do some things that wouldn’t be so healthy. Like give all my friends \$500,000 or something like that. Obviously, I don’t have that many friends! I would do something that would make people happy, like give them things. I think after a while I would realize all these people are now my enemies, and it probably didn’t help them that much. Anyway, the point of this story is that we have to learn to use what we are given. In the gospel passage from Luke, we find Jesus in the desert, being tempted by the devil. We learn from this passage that the temptation symbolizes the work we must do throughout life trying to balance this divine power and human power. Jesus has just left the Jordan. He is now entering into his anointed stage. He has now been gifted with this incredible power of the Spirit, for he felt it was like a dove come zooming into him. The heavens ripped open, and into him comes all this divine spirit. We would think Jesus would be able to handle this instantly; after all he was the Son of God. But Jesus is not able to.

Jesus struggles to balance human power and divine power, and he goes out into the desert where the Spirit wanted him to be tested. It’s interesting that we do not get this balanced life by simply being instructed. We get it by being transformed. When Jesus undergoes these temptations, they are all basically the same temptation. They all are aimed at getting the ego into the system so that we can be in control of it, in charge of it, and work it so that it can become something we can use. We look at this divine power as an asset to our human decision-making powers — as a resource instead of being the source that is going to teach us. We use it instead of being used by it. The first temptation involves the image of a stone. Stone represents the hard stuff, the difficult stuff, that which is hard to digest. The stumbling block. This whole way that God has planned for us is not easy. The temptation is to take this difficult journey and to turn it into something much easier. Like bread. Take this message, Jesus, and change it so it doesn’t have that hard edge. Jesus responds by saying, “You can’t do that because I am rooted not to my ego but to the Word of God, which is God’s wisdom.” Then the devil says, in the second temptation, “Why don’t you go ahead and take this power and I will show you how to use it in a way that will give you extraordinary importance, and you can use this to lord it over people. You can get people to shape up. You can get people to do things You can control them. I will show you the nations of the world. That’s the way the nations of the world work — by taking power and using it over people.” That’s a good image of the world, but Jesus says,

“No, I am not going to use God’s power to dominate, to control. I won’t do it. That’s not what the Scriptures say.”

Then the devil goes into the third temptation, taking Jesus to the temple parapet and telling him to jump off if he believes God will really save him. Use this divine spirit as a kind of backup for anything you want to get accomplished. You become the determiner of what’s done, like you decide if you will jump. Or if you will heal this person. Or accomplish this goal. You decide the goal — and then demand that God does it. It is like power on tap: I will use this power wherever and whenever I need it. We then become the center. The core issue of the whole Christian journey is this: How do we relate in terms of our human spirit to this divine spirit within us? The excruciating truth is that we have to submit. We have to give in; we have to give over to it. If we think this comes easy, it doesn’t. If we think it can come without pain, it can’t. If we think it can come without struggle, it can’t. This season of Lent is an exercise, a discipline, to enter more fully into something we call the transforming work of the Scriptures. We call it the transforming work of this tradition, which is a kind of “breaking down” of this self-centered, autonomous ego and a “breaking open” of a relationship that is extraordinary. When we are in that extraordinary place called the promised land, the promised place, there is a mysterious peace. An extraordinary peace comes over us that somehow knows, in the words of the English mystic Julian of Norwich, that “all will be well.” Everything is going to be okay. We trust through that as we continue to allow this Spirit to guide us.

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In God We Trust?

By [Rev. Walter J. Burghardt, SJ](#)

Last week a thoughtful article in *Time* magazine expressed vividly the fears, the uncertainties, the angers of middle-class America.¹ I mean the 63% of the American population where families of four earn between \$18,500 and \$74,300. Not only is it more difficult for the average middle-class American to make ends meet than it was a few years ago. Not only do they worry about school tuitions and running out of medical insurance. Not only are they afraid of crime in the streets, of crack in their children. In the new world that has emerged with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Americans are confused. (1) The powers we defeated in war, Japan and Germany, are challenging us economically. (2) A massive influx of new immigrants is challenging our sense of identity: Who are we? Are we still one people? (3) The baby-boomers, just about reaching mid-life crisis, are tasting the disillusion, the hopelessness, that hit "when people think their best years are behind them."²

Good friends, it's a good time for Lent to show its face. Fear not. I am not about to tell you how superb a thing sacrifice is, how blessed the poor are in God's eyes, what perils lurk in possessions. Not that I deny this. Even more importantly, in today's readings Moses and Jesus and Paul all highlight a virtue, a gift of God, a monosyllable which ultimately is our only antidote to the fears, the uncertainties, the anger of America in the nineties. So, let me do my usual three-step: (1) recapture the experience of Moses, Paul, and Jesus; (2) talk a bit about the momentous monosyllable each of them stresses; (3) ask how all this touches us.

I

First, our three speakers, our superstars. What is Moses telling his countrymen? Why is he recalling the "bad days" in Egypt? What you have here is something typical of a pattern you find in the Hebrew Testament from Genesis to 2 Kings. The pattern is (1) oppression, (2) cry for help, (3) divine action in response to the cry.³ Listen to Moses: "The Egyptians treated us harshly, and afflicted us, and laid upon us hard bondage. Then we cried to the Lord the God of our fathers, and the Lord heard our voice...and brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm" (Deut 26:6—8). Oppression, petition, relief.

Leap over the centuries to Jesus. To Jesus tempted by the devil. Yes, the Son of God tempted. For, as the New Testament Letter to the Hebrews insists, "We have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are..." (Heb 4:15). But tempted to what, to what evil thing? Very simply, to use his power, his authority, as Son of God in his own interest, for his own purposes, apart from the mission given him by his Father. (1) You're hungry; you haven't had a bite for 40 days. Well, you're the Son of God, aren't you? So, change stones to bagels. Try it, you'll like it. (2) You want to rule the world, don't you? Isn't that why you're here? For a kingdom? So, I'll give it to you. Just fall on your face and worship me. (3) You want to make a name for yourself, don't you? You want the people to listen, the way they listen to George Burns? Well, here's your chance. Amaze the motley mob, jump like Superman from the tip of the temple.

Jesus' reply? In each instance, a reference to his Father. (1) You don't live on bread alone; you live on every word from God's mouth. (2) It's only the Lord our God a creature dares to worship. (3) Don't you dare tempt God.

Now leap a few decades to St. Paul. A comforting, consoling sentence: One "Lord of all," Jesus the Christ, "bestows his riches upon all who call upon him" (Rom 10:12). Call upon him and your life will be enriched beyond imagining.

II

So, point number two: What is the magic monosyllable Moses and Jesus and Paul imply? Trust. Not some vague word you toss about thoughtlessly: "Of course I trust you." Not a word stamped on a coin, "In God we trust." Not a feeble wish that all just might work out. Christian trust is a wedding of three realities, three gifts. It is a hope that springs from faith and is kept alive by love.

Trust is a hope. It is a confident expectation that, no matter what happens, God will be there—God *is* there. For you. With you. But you will not enjoy that confident expectation unless your faith is founded on rock. For you know that God is with you not from some ironclad philosophical proof. You know it because the Son of God promised you—a promise sealed not with a pen but with his blood. And you hope even against hope because you're in love.

It's dear Job on the village dump, all his children killed, all his possessions gone, loathsome sores from head to foot, his wife urging him "Curse God and die" (Job 2:9), yet still trusting God. Not because God has explained to him the mystery of suffering, of evil, but because he has seen God's face; God has appeared to him. It's teenage Mary of Nazareth, asked by an angel to mother God's Son, not knowing all that God was asking of

her, only that it was God who was asking—and responding in simple trust, "Let it happen to me as you say" (Lk 1:38). Whatever you want, Lord.

It's Jesus himself sweating blood in the Garden of Gethsemane: "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done" (Lk 22:42). Jesus crying aloud, "Father, into your hands I entrust my spirit" (Lk 23:46). Jesus dying not with absolute proof that he would rise again—dying only with hope, trust in his Father's love.

It's a true story told me by a Bahamian priest. A two-story house had caught fire. The family—father, mother, several small children were on their way out when the smallest boy became terrified, tore away from his mother, ran back upstairs. Suddenly he appeared at a smoke-filled window, crying like crazy. His father, outside, shouted to him: "Jump, son, jump! I'll catch you." The boy cried: "But, daddy, I can't see you." "I know," his father called, "I know. But *I* can see you."

III

Now for the nitty-gritty. What of you and me? How can you and I possibly continue to hope against hope—when cancer strikes, when a career is blasted, when the pink slip comes, when my life style is threatened, when a child is murdered, when I'm utterly alone and unbearably lonely, when there's nothing left to live for? Let me simply tell you why *I* trust.

Why do *I* trust, I this strange combo of man, Christian, Jesuit, and priest?⁴ Behind it, of course, lies God's good grace. But what keeps God's gift alive in me is my own day-by-day experience. I trust God because I have seen what trust can do for men and women who murmur confidently with the Psalmist, "Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me" (Ps 23:4).

I have seen Martin Luther King Jr. with his dream, undimmed by a bullet, that one day "all of God's children, black and white, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual: 'Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!'"⁵ I have seen Solidarity in Poland, seen Polish workers without weapons, with hope only in God and the courage God gave them, overcome an army, overthrow a government. I have seen El Salvador: martyred Archbishop Romero crying "Enough!" to the death squads, my six Jesuit brothers and their two lay sisters massacred by the military because they believed with St. Paul that "If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied" (1 Cor 15:19). I have seen Dorothy Day, Communist-turned-Catholic, with her houses of hospitality and her breadlines; walking picket lines, jailed for supporting Mexican itinerant workers, squaring off against a New York cardinal in defense of cemetery strikers; arguing passionately that the poor do *not* have the gospel preached to them; living with the criminal, the unbalanced, the drunken, the degraded; reflecting with Dostoevsky that "Hell is not to love any more"; loving the Church that was so often a scandal to her, loving it because it made Christ visible.⁶

More personally, I trust God because of a lady I met briefly 50 years ago: flat on her back for 25 years, paralyzed from the neck down, more alive than I, heart intent on God yet thinking only of others. I trust God because of another lady 50 years later in a D.C. hospital, totally blind, both legs amputated, smiling at me like the risen Christ. I trust God

because of my own mother, at the graveside of my father and only brother, dead within three weeks of each other, and looking through her tears up to heaven, to a God she did not understand, a God she never stopped loving. I trust God because of the thousands of men and women whose lives have intersected with mine, have touched mine briefly or long, men and women who have carried Christ's cross in a hundred different ways, have died and risen time and again, men and women who have been tempted to despair but kept repeating with the Psalmist, "Even though you should slay me, I will continue to hope in you."

How have they managed to hang on? Again, ultimately by God's grace. But with that, in my experience, they have given themselves to others, their life expressed in St. Paul's impassioned outburst to the Christians of Corinth, "I will most gladly spend and be spent for you" (2 Cor 12:15). Spent for those equally or more agonizingly crucified: the aged hungry and the children abused, the drug-addicted and the AIDS-afflicted, MS and Down's syndrome, the homeless and the helpless, the unloved. In a word, they bring hope to others. Bringing hope to others, they find their own hope deepened.

But remember always, trust such as this stems from a profound faith and is nourished by limitless love. As dear old job discovered, you don't first prove that God is worthy of trust and then come to love God. When God appeared to job, God did not explain patiently and clearly why innocent job was sitting atop the village dump scraping his loathsome sores and cursing the day he was born; God touched job, and that was enough for him. The movement is simple but difficult: from experience of God...to love for God...to trust in God. You begin with love; you are touched by God; then you will throw yourself unconditionally into God's hands, cry with Jesus, "Father, into your hands I entrust my spirit" (Lk 23:46).

This is why Lent is so important. Jesus journeying to Jerusalem is not some mythical figure from the past carrying his solitary cross. Jesus carrying his cross is my father struck with cancer at 53, my mother senile at seventy. Jesus in Gethsemane is the couple in North Carolina who cannot afford to buy a house, who worry what the future holds for their two-month-old daughter Grace.⁷ Jesus carrying his cross is you and I. As Christians, St. Paul declares, we are "always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies" (2 Cor 4:10). With Paul, "I carry the marks of Jesus branded on my body" (Gal 6:17). Christian life is a ceaseless journeying to Jerusalem. The journey has begun; it began when you were born. Don't walk it alone; walk it with Jesus. Now.

From *Speak the Word with Boldness* © 1994 Paulist Press, available at www.paulistpress.com.

For Your Penance, Look Redeemed

By [Rev. Walter J. Burghardt, SJ](#)

Lent is a problem today. As I was growing up, and even much later, words like penance, sacrifice, fasting, and abstinence were part of our Lenten vocabulary. They had been drilled into us-in church, at home, especially in the parochial school. I do not say they have disappeared (witness, for example, the Lenten pastorals), but they no longer dominate our mind-set and speech patterns. This is not the place to argue the reasons: do

you indict our culture, or do you blame it all on Vatican II ?

Although this movement raises problems for the "old Lenten spirit, " I do not find it without value. For one thing, it has compelled me to rethink the meaning of Lent in liturgy and life. The process was brought to a head as I prepared to preach in Georgetown University's Dahlgren Chapel on the first Sunday of Lent 1979.

The fresh (not new, simply rediscovered) approach to Lent in this homily began with a holy card: the "smiling Christ" of Lérins. It concretized questions with which I had been struggling for quite some time. What precisely is the Christian trying to do these forty days? Is there room for Lenten laughter? If there is, what is its relationship to the tears of Lent? Where should our penitential emphasis lie? What ought we to "give up "-besides sin?

I think I learned something about Lent; I know I learned something about myself.

In the famous Abbey of Lérins, on an island off the southeast coast of France, there is an unusual sculpture. It may go back to the twelfth century, and it has for title Christ souriant, "the smiling Christ." Jesus is imprisoned on the cross; his head is leaning somewhat to the right; his eyes are closed-in death, I think; but on his lips there is a soft, serene smile.

The smiling Christ-here is my springboard for Lent. And if you prefer Scripture to sculpture, if you need a text to test my orthodoxy, I give you Jesus in Ash Wednesday's Gospel: "When you fast, do not look gloomy, like the hypocrites" (Mt 6:16). I know this raises a problem, and I'm glad it does. As usual, three points. First, a look at Jesus: did he really smile? Second, a look at Lent: is it for laughing or for crying? Third, a look at you: what now till Easter?

First then, a look at Jesus: did he really smile? Did he actually, laugh? One tradition is enshrined in some fourth-century monastic rules of St. Basil the Great: "so far as we know from the story of 1 Gospel, he never laughed. On the contrary, he even pronoun(those unhappy who are given to laughter (Lk 6:25)." Oh yes, had "joy of spirit," he had "merriment of soul." But as for its "outward expression," as for "hilarity," no. Such a one would not "master of every passion," would not be "perfectly continent."

True, the Gospels never say that Jesus smiled or laughed, they twice testify that he wept-over Jerusalem and over Lazarus, over his city and his friend. But I do not understand how one % was like us in everything save sin could have wept from sorrow 1 not laughed for joy. How could he fail to smile when a child cuddled comfortably in his arms, or when the headwaiter at Cana wondered where the good wine had come from, or when he saw little Zaccheus up a tree, or when Jairus' daughter awakened to life at touch, or when Peter put his foot in his mouth once again? I refuse to believe that he did not laugh when he saw something funny, when he experienced in the depths of his manhood the presence his Father. Too often Christians have been so aware of Jesus' divinity that his humanity became somewhat unreal, artificial. No, was like us... .

I do not say Jesus smiled when his fellow townsmen cast h over a cliff. I do not pretend he laughed in Gethsemane. I do not know if he died with a smile on his lips. There are moments when you cannot smile, when it makes no sense to laugh. But that's not the point. The point is: here is a man whose whole life was a to a cross, a man who cried out that he was in anguish until his death should be accomplished-and still he moved through I very much as we do. He attracted not only fishermen and centurions but children, simple folk, women like Mars of Magdala-and he could hardly have done so with thunderbolts, if he had of "spoken with authority," if his face wore ever the stern mask o judge and did not crease into a smile or break out into me; laughter.

II

Second, a look at Lent: is it for laughing or for crying? Grant that Jesus smiled, is there

any place for the smiling Christ these forty days? I say there is. But to understand this, you must grasp a crucial Christian fact: in Lent we are not pretending.

Neither in Lent's liturgy nor in Lent's living dare we make believe that Christ is not yet risen, that we have to wait for Easter to see his resurrection, to live it, to enjoy it. Even in Lent you and I are risen Christians. And the twin fact that Jesus is risen and that we have risen with him into a new life must color the way we celebrate Lent, must color our asceticism, our self-denial. Oh yes, during these weeks we re-present the stages of our Lord's pilgrimage to Jerusalem, his way to the cross; but we do it as risen Christians. And that means we do right to reproduce in our own Lent, in our own suffering, on our own cross, the smiling Christ of Lérins. The cross is victory, not defeat; and we do not have to wait for that victory, wait for Easter to dawn.

But we cannot pretend the other way either. Simply because we have risen with Christ in baptism, we cannot make believe that Lent does not really exist. Risen we are, but not yet fully risen: "We ourselves," St. Paul agonizes, "we who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inside ourselves as we wait for ... the redemption of our bodies" (Rom 8:23). And so we must ceaselessly reproduce the journey of Jesus to Jerusalem, not only symbolically and liturgically but in our flesh and bones and in the wrenching of our spirit. That is why our laughter is not yet full-throated; that is why it is often through tears that we smile; that is why we still have to pray "Father ... remove this cup from me" (Lk 22:42). We have not been transformed completely into the risen Christ; that transformation will take place only if we go up to Jerusalem with Jesus. The smiling Christ rests on a cross.

Is Lent for laughing or for crying? I say, for both. But I am stressing the laughter of Lent because it is so far removed from our spirituality. It is almost as hard to find a smiling Christian on Good Friday as it is to find a "smiling Christ" in crucifixion art. In my memory, those of us who took Lent seriously, from Ash Wednesday's "dust thou art" to Holy Saturday's empty tomb and tabernacle, only confirmed Nietzsche's cutting critique about Christians: we "do not look redeemed."

III

Finally, a look at you: what now till Easter? I do not reject Jesus' injunction in today's Gospel: "Repent..." (Mk 1:15). However turned from sin you are, you stand in need of constant conversion, must keep turning to Christ. And those whose face is turned totally from him, any who need a radical conversion-it is not time for them to smile serenely. Their Lent is limpid: they give up sin. But assume that you who gather here each Sunday are already on the road to Jerusalem with Jesus. To you I suggest a twin approach to these forty days; what a splendid spiritual writer has called "an asceticism of humor" and "a diaconate of humor."

For yourself personally, individually, an asceticism of humor - a fresh form of self-denial. A young lady once said to me: "Why are you so hard on yourself?" It was the only self-denial I knew: keep that rebellious flesh under control, and be intolerant of imperfection-mine and everyone else's! To you I am suggesting that you give up something sweeter than candy, smokier than Kents, perhaps more destructive than sin. I mean an absorption in yourself - where you take yourself all too seriously, where the days and nights rotate around you, your heartache and your hiatal hernia, your successes and failures, your problems and frustrations. For an asceticism of humor, you must distance yourself from yourself, see yourself in perspective, as you really are. I mean a creature wonderfully yet fearfully made, a bundle of paradoxes and contradictions. You believe and doubt, hope and despair, love and hate. You are exciting and boring, enchanted and disillusioned, manic and depressive. You are "cool" on the outside and you hurt within. You feel bad about feeling good; you are afraid of your joy, feel guilty if you don't feel guilty. You are trusting and suspicious, selfless and selfish, wide-open and locked in. You know so much and so little. You are honest and you still play games. Aristotle said you are a rational

animal; I say you are an angel with an incredible capacity for beer!

If it is the incongruous, what does not fit, that makes for humor, you can indeed smile at yourself. So, let Christ the harlequin, the clown Christ, into your spiritual life: you are not laughing sacrilegiously at him; he is poking gentle fun at you-through tears.⁴ St. Ignatius Loyola has a rule for Jesuits: our "whole countenance should reflect cheerfulness rather than sadness. . . ." If we don't obey Ignatius, you should!

And your smile will turn to lusty laughter if you only realize how lovable you are-not because of anything you have made of yourself, but because God loves you, because God died for you, because God lives in you ... now.

But an asceticism of humor dare not remain a private joke. Humor, someone has said, good humor is basically looking at the world, at others, with eyes of love-being in love without restriction. An asceticism of humor must move out into a diaconate of humor: you deacon, you minister, the smiling Christ to others. I do not mean that you paint on a false smile or bellow forever with laughter. Simply that, with your new-found Christian delight in yourself, you go out to your brothers and sisters (even to your husband or wife!)- as you are, where they are.

Where they are.... Not far from you is someone who is afraid and needs your courage; or lonely and needs your presence; or hurt and needs your healing. So many feel unloved and need your touching; are old and need to feel that you care. Many are weak in so many ways and need for support your own shared weakness. One of the most helpful words I ever spoke was to confess to a woman that I too had doubts about faith. "You?" she cried. "Oh, thank God!" You will rarely know greater happiness than when through you a smile is born on the face of someone in pain; you will have given birth to a smiling Christ.

Christianity needs men and women who repent of their smallness, fast from their selfishness, abstain from isolation. Lent calls for risen Christians, men and women like the hero of Eugene O'Neill's play *Lazarus Laughed* the Lazarus who has tasted death and sees it for what it is, whose joy in living is irresistible, whose invitation to the world is his infectious cry:

Laugh with me!
Death is dead!
Fear is no more!
There is only life!
There is only laughter!

Unreal? In a sense, yes-when you look at the Middle East, Northern Ireland, Southeast Asia; when you touch bellies bloated with hunger or shriveled from cancer. But where does the Christian start-start to overcome fear and death? Here, right where you are; now, not after Easter. By bringing the smiling Christ, the joy of Jesus, to one man, woman, or child reliving his passion. Who knows? It just might be your own healing, your own salvation.

At any rate, if the crucified Christ can look redeeming, the crucified Christian can at least look redeemed! For your Lenten penance, therefore, please ... look ... redeemed.

From *Tell the Next Generation* © 1980 Paulist Press

First Sunday of Lent, cycle C

By [Don L. Fischer](#)

SCRIPTURE: Deuteronomy 26:4-10; Romans 10:8-13; Luke 4:1-13

In the opening prayer of this first Sunday of a season dedicated to transformation, we are reminded — as we were on Ash Wednesday — that we are human. Remember man, that thou art dust, and unto dust thou shalt return. This is a statement taken from the Old Testament, the book of Genesis, when Adam and Eve had sinned. They had inflated their position with God. They had decided it was a good idea to be like God. They didn't want to just remain human and dependent on God. They lost this relationship, this harmony that was their inheritance. As they were leaving the garden, God said many things to Adam and Eve. He implied that they would have to deal with pain and suffering and the work of the world. They would have to till the soil and feel the urge and pull of sexual desire inside of them. All of these things that are so basically human are things Adam and Eve would now experience. God said to Adam: "Remember that you are dust. Remember that you are human. It's your humanity that you need to return to. You need to get back into that disposition of recognizing how much you need me, and how much the relationship I want to have with you is one where you are dependent on me. You are not independent. You are not autonomous. You are not equal to me."

It's fascinating to me that the human spirit, which is an incredible gift God has given to us, has this dimension to it which enables it to imagine a lot of things. One of the things it can imagine is that its power is awesome — and it is. But it's not enough. I think the fact that we are invited to remain close to our humanity is that we are invited to remain close to the simple truth that we are in something, called life, and it is over our heads. We can do extraordinary things. We are phenomenal creatures; our minds are amazing for what they can discover and figure out. It's true that we as human beings have the capacity to understand a lot of things. In fact, we are living in an explosion of information. We know so much. But isn't it interesting that information is not necessarily something that puts us in touch with the kingdom. Information often puts us in touch with the capacity the human spirit has to accomplish things. It's very important for us to remember that information is one thing; transformation is another. Information is something we can work on and discover, and the human ego is great at finding it. The human ego is filled with curiosity. We have the tools available to us now that no generation in the history of the world has ever had to find out things. But it doesn't necessarily make the world better, in the sense of the way in which we use information. Information can be used for anything. I think a lot of people are nervous about the kinds of things we are discovering, about the kind of things we are capable of doing. Whenever those things get real close to what we sense God and only God is supposed to do, a lot of us get nervous. I think there's good reason for that. The tradition we belong to, the gut instinct when we really get in touch with our soul, is that we don't have enough wisdom (which is different from information!) to necessarily handle the tough decisions, the hard issues, the kinds of things that are beyond our comprehension.

During the season of Lent, we are involved in a work in which we are invited to open ourselves up to the mystery of transformation. The whole notion of this season of Lent is about growth and change. The word Lent means "spring," a time of growth and transformation. Lent is not just about growth in a human sense. It's about spiritual growth. It's about wisdom. It's about opening ourselves up to the reality that bottom line, in our Judeo-Christian tradition, God has created us human. We are limited, unable to do all he has asked us to do. God offers us his partnership, this Spirit, this anointing that is our inheritance. God wants to anoint us, and that empowers us. We work with the human spirit and the divine spirit — and together we can accomplish extraordinary things. We

have a figure, a living example of what this looks like. What does it look like to see a human spirit, fully developed, that is also filled with divine spirit? And it understands the balance between the two. That was the figure of Jesus. And so, we have this model. What a terrible thing we do to this model when we try to oversimplify it or try to turn it into something that is a caricature! Like Jesus was this perfect figure, that everywhere he walked there were angels' voices. I remember as a child going to those religious movies where you never saw the face of Jesus. It was always like you saw the back of his head. Every time, Jesus walked into a place, jaws dropped. Angels' voices filled the theater. It was like, "Whoa, this guy was just incredible." I bet you that if you walked up to Jesus or bumped into him in the temple you would probably say, "Hmm, that's an interesting person," and then walk on. I don't think people would respond in such a dramatic way because even today I don't see that happening. There aren't many people who walk around, and everybody falls in front of them. We have the inheritance of being like Jesus; we are like him.

What does a human being look like who has truly entered into this place called the kingdom? Let's look at the readings today, because they help establish the setting for this season focused on transformation. They set some things in front of us that are important for us to contemplate. The first is the Paschal Mystery. This is what Lent is trying to invite us into. We are transformed by entering into the Paschal Mystery. The Paschal Mystery is that strange experience in our tradition. We can see it experienced in the lives of all those who are engaged in salvation history. It goes something like this: We start off, and we are in this wonderful, innocent place. We go from this innocent place to a place of awareness. We become informed. The ego gets stretched. It stands up and says, "Whoa, this is pretty exciting, the things I am able to accomplish." And then, we go for it. We use our own energy and understanding to try to accomplish the things that God has asked us to accomplish. We get out there, and we think we are making it — and we fall flat on our face. Then the enemies take us over. We lose everything. We fall down. Then, we rise again, when we recognize, "I can't do this on my own." When we rise, we are completely different. That is the Paschal Mystery. We start off in a kind of neutral position. We go in a direction that is too inflated. We fall down, and then we start up again. Except for the fact that when we start up again, we are not the same. Look at the reading from Deuteronomy. It's a description of the Israelite community, a tiny beginning, completely insignificant. A little wandering tribe. They get into a situation and become a great nation. All of a sudden, slavery comes into their lives. This is a wonderful image of every kind of addiction, every kind of sin there is. We end up giving ourselves over to a way of life that is enslaving. Whatever it is, we end up working and struggling and doing things — and we are somehow trapped in something that is effective. But we are not free. We are not full. We are not complete. We are missing something. Into that enclosed, imprisoned sense comes a Spirit. Like Moses the prophet. God calls Moses and tells him, "I want my people to be free." Then they go through this excruciating process of trying to get free. They finally make it. Once they get free, it's not over.

Once they understand they have this wonderful thing called divine spirit entering into their history that is going to change everything, the Israelite people have got to learn to deal with that power. Off these people go, passing through the Red Sea, out into the desert. They will then get to the promised land. What is the desert, other than the place of being tested? The place of growing. The place of understanding how this extraordinary power can work with us. The minute that extraordinary power is given, we get confused on how to use it. The ego, which is the part of us that is the human spirit, always wants to say, "Wow, I've got all of this power." I imagine this is sort of like money. If you have a

lot of money, you say, “I wonder what I can do with all of this. I have \$6 million. What will I do with \$6 million.” I would say most of us — and I would put myself at the front of this list — would do some things that wouldn’t be so healthy. Like give all my friends \$500,000 or something like that. Obviously, I don’t have that many friends! I would do something that would make people happy, like give them things. I think after a while I would realize all these people are now my enemies, and it probably didn’t help them that much. Anyway, the point of this story is that we have to learn to use what we are given. In the gospel passage from Luke, we find Jesus in the desert, being tempted by the devil. We learn from this passage that the temptation symbolizes the work we must do throughout life trying to balance this divine power and human power. Jesus has just left the Jordan. He is now entering into his anointed stage. He has now been gifted with this incredible power of the Spirit, for he felt it was like a dove come zooming into him. The heavens ripped open, and into him comes all this divine spirit. We would think Jesus would be able to handle this instantly; after all he was the Son of God. But Jesus is not able to.

Jesus struggles to balance human power and divine power, and he goes out into the desert where the Spirit wanted him to be tested. It’s interesting that we do not get this balanced life by simply being instructed. We get it by being transformed. When Jesus undergoes these temptations, they are all basically the same temptation. They all are aimed at getting the ego into the system so that we can be in control of it, in charge of it, and work it so that it can become something we can use. We look at this divine power as an asset to our human decision-making powers — as a resource instead of being the source that is going to teach us. We use it instead of being used by it. The first temptation involves the image of a stone. Stone represents the hard stuff, the difficult stuff, that which is hard to digest. The stumbling block. This whole way that God has planned for us is not easy. The temptation is to take this difficult journey and to turn it into something much easier. Like bread. Take this message, Jesus, and change it so it doesn’t have that hard edge. Jesus responds by saying, “You can’t do that because I am rooted not to my ego but to the Word of God, which is God’s wisdom.” Then the devil says, in the second temptation, “Why don’t you go ahead and take this power and I will show you how to use it in a way that will give you extraordinary importance, and you can use this to lord it over people. You can get people to shape up. You can get people to do things You can control them. I will show you the nations of the world. That’s the way the nations of the world work — by taking power and using it over people.” That’s a good image of the world, but Jesus says, “No, I am not going to use God’s power to dominate, to control. I won’t do it. That’s not what the Scriptures say.”

Then the devil goes into the third temptation, taking Jesus to the temple parapet and telling him to jump off if he believes God will really save him. Use this divine spirit as a kind of backup for anything you want to get accomplished. You become the determiner of what’s done, like you decide if you will jump. Or if you will heal this person. Or accomplish this goal. You decide the goal — and then demand that God does it. It is like power on tap: I will use this power wherever and whenever I need it. We then become the center. The core issue of the whole Christian journey is this: How do we relate in terms of our human spirit to this divine spirit within us? The excruciating truth is that we have to submit. We have to give in; we have to give over to it. If we think this comes easy, it doesn’t. If we think it can come without pain, it can’t. If we think it can come without struggle, it can’t. This season of Lent is an exercise, a discipline, to enter more fully into something we call the transforming work of the Scriptures. We call it the transforming work of this tradition, which is a kind of “breaking down” of this self-centered, autonomous ego and a “breaking open” of a relationship that is extraordinary. When we

are in that extraordinary place called the promised land, the promised place, there is a mysterious peace. An extraordinary peace comes over us that somehow knows, in the words of the English mystic Julian of Norwich, that “all will be well.” Everything is going to be okay. We trust through that as we continue to allow this Spirit to guide us.

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