

# Lent, I

**Lent.** There is an interesting word! It seems to come from the late 14c Old English word of *lencten*, meaning “springtime or spring.” There’s also a connection with the West Germanic *langitīnaz* or “lengthening of day.”

Any Catholic who is serious about reforming their lives knows that somehow, Lent plays – or should play – an important role. It’s in our Catholic blood. The days start to lengthen and there is that touch of spring you detect even in snowy Colorado. Maybe it’s the way the birds start to sing, like Chaucer alludes to:

*And smale foweles maken melodye,  
That slepen al the nyght with open ye  
(so priketh hem Nature in hir corages),  
Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages,*

You want to do something; a pilgrimage, a journey, anything but staying where you are; anything but staying stuck.

Not everyone can afford to make the *Camino* in Spain or the pilgrimage to Chartres, but everyone can make a journey right at home and at the parish – the destination being Easter. The greatest thing blocking this journey will be our predominant fault. Fr. Garrigou-Lagrange O.P. describes this fault as “our domestic enemy dwelling in our interior... at times it is like a crack in a wall that seems to be solid but is not so: like a crevice, imperceptible at times but deep, in the beautiful facade of a building, which a vigorous jolt may shake to the foundations.”

Knowing what this fault is will be a tremendous advantage in the journey, because it will point to its opposite virtue. So if your predominant fault is anger, then you’ll need to aim at gentleness or docility. And even a little growth in gentleness will help all the other virtues grow, and the other vices decrease. Don’t count on just one Lent being enough; it might take several. But one good Lent can be a powerful means to overcome the predominant fault, especially if followed up with a joyful Easter.

How do we find out what our predominant fault is? One way is to ask your wife if you have one; she will likely know what it is if you don’t, and maybe even cooperate with your desire to know with great enthusiasm.

But don’t be surprised if it is hard to identify. This is contained in the Parable of the Mustard Tree. Now there is a rather pleasant way to look at this parable; where a small act can become something great – the celebrated French atheist Andre Frossard happening to go into a church during the *Asperges*, and the holy water burned him, and he converted, and goes on to do much good. But there is another way to look at the parable, and it is not so pleasant. For when the tree is grown up, it is so big that the birds of the air come and dwell in the branches thereof. We have seen these birds before. They are mentioned in the Parable of the Sower. They come and eat the seed which did not fall on good soil. And our Lord explains that they are the devils, they are vices.

Notice that in a small tree with just a few branches, it is easy to see a birds nest. Not only is a nest easy to see, it is fairly easy to remove in a young tree. Not so with a large or older tree. There are so many branches, and so much foliage, that it is difficult to see.

And even after seeing the nest, it is difficult to remove as it may be high up; just so with adults in the faith. The more one knows the Faith, the greater the tree, and the more difficult to see the vices in ourselves, and the more difficult to remove. We become used to the fault, we are in the habit of looking at the world through it, and it hides itself, taking on the appearance of virtue. Thus weakness hides in a cloak of humility, and pride in the outfit of magnanimity, and uncontrolled anger tries to pass itself off as righteous indignation. So how do we find this fault if there is no saintly person nearby to assist?

We have to go into the cellar of self-knowledge, as St. Bernard of Clairvaux would say. A lot of people don’t do this, often because they don’t like what they see there. But it is necessary, and if you ask your Guardian Angel to help you have the courage to do so, he will, with even more enthusiasm than your wife.

But since the source and summit of all the Church’s activity is the sacrifice of the Mass, is there something we could take from the Mass to do in the home to assist this going into the cellar? I recommend candlelight.

Light is strictly prescribed for the celebration of Holy Mass. There is no legislation about electric light (a parish can use as much as it wants and of whatever kind), but there is plenty about the candles on the altar. For a burning candle on an altar is intended to represent Christ. The flame above it represents His Divinity; the candle itself, His humanity; and the wick, His soul.

The liturgical use of light does not have its origin in the mere dispelling of darkness (though it does just that), nor should it be seen primarily as a reminder of the Masses that had to be celebrated in the darkness of the catacombs during the time of persecution (though it does that too). Instead, the primary reason for the use of candles may be found in the prayers for Candlemas Day (in the Extraordinary Form of the Roman Rite), on which the Church implores God “to grant that as the candles lighted with visible fire dispel the darkness of night, so in like manner our hearts, enlightened by invisible fire, that is, by the resplendent light of the Holy Ghost, may be delivered from all blindness of sin and with the purified eyes of the spirit be enabled to perceive what is pleasing to Him and conducive to our salvation, in order that, after the dark and dangerous combats of this earthly life, we may come to the possession of immortal light.”

Supper can look good and tasty if the light is good. I suppose that’s why a classy restaurant uses candlelight, or as close as they can get to it. Candlelight changes everything at a meal. It even makes us look good, whereas fluorescent light brings out every flaw and washes out color.

The flame of light is mysterious (this can be experienced profoundly at the Easter Vigil, when only candlelight is used for the first part of the liturgy), pure, beautiful, radiant, and full of brightness and warmth.

So, if you’re prone to distraction, or are having some trouble entering the cellar of self-knowledge, then light a candle to pray by. It makes quite a difference.