**1st Sunday in Lent – February 21, 2021 – TCSF**

**Turning Outward and Focusing on Prayer**

Lent, this mysterious season of our liturgical year, always has something special for us. What do I mean by that? Lent is this mixture of penance, fasting and almsgiving but not in a negative way, but in the most positive way. It seems counter intuitive to us that Lent actually makes us happier. But it does! And why is that? It is because when we are holier – more whole, complete and healthy in the eyes of God – we are happier. That is what we all really want, right? Happiness! The Church, her teachings and her saints agree. Happiness is the sign of a healthy, holier you! St. Thomas Aquinas, the Angelic Doctor, describes happiness is when you have all you want, providing that you want not evil. So wanting for someone else to fail, to be hurt, to “get even”, will not make us happy. What does make us happy? Living virtuously. St. Thomas says, *Happiness is secured through virtue; it is a good attained by man’s own will*.

As humans, we struggle mightily with this idea of virtue and making choices that will keep us living virtuously. There are many reasons for this and many of them are truly out of our control – which is why Lent is so mysterious. But let’s first talk about what is out of our control and then what is in our control.

The things that are out of our control is the world that we inherited. Whether full of the beauty of grace, like a gorgeous sunrise, or the darkness of sin, like a scene after an earthquake, the world is a battleground. We hear in the first reading of this from the story of Noah and the ark. God made us for sunrises, not earthquakes! But sin changed that. So he desired to make a new covenant, one that would even conquer sin. The flood symbolizes this removal of sin and a fresh start. We cannot control this, this was all God. He didn’t need to forgive us after Adam and Eve sinned, but his love for us is too strong. So he pushed the proverbial reset button by giving us an invitation into a new life, the sacramental life of the Church. It is through baptism that our souls are cleansed and made ready for the life that we choose. But the Devil and powers of Evil are looking to trick us once again as they already tricked Adam and Eve, so now we get into the part where we have control.

The life we live depends completely on the grace of God. We wouldn’t be here if God allowed us to be. So by the very fact you are here in the Church, listening to these words, preparing to receive the Eucharist, is proof of God’s love for you. Many people throughout the world do not have the sacraments so available – God knew that you and me truly need them in this way! Jesus showed us today that we will be tempted. The very first thing that happened to Christ after his baptism was what we heard in the Gospel today, *The spirit drove Jesus out into the desert, and he remained in the desert for forty days, tempted by Satan*. My brothers and sisters, so often we fall into the belief that if “I am a good Catholic”, we are immune to temptations. And if we are tempted, then something is wrong. If Jesus was tempted, we certainly will be too. In fact, Jesus was tempted for 40 days to show us that if we stay the course, if we know our scripture, if we receive the sacraments, if we stay humble and do not rely on ourselves, we are very strong! Our happiness does not mean that we have a lot or know a lot, or are in good health even, but that we know we are loved and saved.

There are three stages in the spiritual life: purgative, illuminative and unitive. This is outlined especially well by the great Carmelite Saint and Doctor, St. Teresa of Avila. We are all at different stages in our lives. Where are you? Purgative means we are still working on turning off things that distract us from God and lead us to near occasions of sin, or sin itself. This includes the tv shows we watch, the music we listen to, engaging in the affairs of others through gossip, or having our goals in our job or family something other than being thankful and holy. The Illuminative Way is the next step, is when we receive light from God to see the world in a new way. Once we are free from grave sins, we ask for the grace to have a stronger interior life. It is when we start understanding in a very convicted way that our faith is not transactional, but one based on friendship. For example: I don’t go to Mass only out of the obligation, but because there is no place in the world that I can receive Jesus. Or I do something good for my spouse when I am tired because Jesus wants that for me. Or when something unfortunate happens, rather than complaining of discomfort, we offer it up to God with gratitude knowing that this is the Cross that will save us.

Lastly, the Unitive Way, something only saints truly enjoy while on earth, is that true, free happiness we all long for but no amount of money, fame or power can buy. It is the third and final stage of Christian perfection. It has the principle feature of a more or less constant awareness of God’s presence, and complete conformity to God’s will. Unitive means union. The soul is so detached from sin and so eager to listen to God’s will, they move as one, like a half-time band moving in perfect synchronization. That would be awesome. But, we cannot attain something without knowing where we are going. So being in perfect union with God on earth so as to be with Him in heaven is our goal. Where are we today in our spiritual, prayer lives, and where would we like to be at the end of this Lent?

Thomas Aquinas reminds us that living virtuously is what leads to happiness: a strong prayer life does not happen by itself. We have to sacrifice, train, and love just like a dedicated athlete. So make manageable yet real goals this Lent, and God promises the great reward of happiness. Temptation is not avoidable, Jesus shows us that, but it is able to be overcome and deflected. This is done through purging our sins, illuminating our minds with good things, and resting in union of God’s presence. I leave you with this timely quote from 1 Timothy from Liturgy of the Hours that all priests and religious pray each day: *my brothers, we beg and exhort you in the Lord Jesus that, even as you learned from us how to conduct yourselves in a way pleasing to God, so you must learn to make still greater progress. God has not called us to immorality but to holiness*. It is not enough to be live forever, that would be boring, but to live with God in holiness, now that is exciting. Pray the rosary every day, read the scriptures every day and pray every day, God is calling each one of us to something special this Lent.