

## First Sunday of Lent – Year A

If you were asked to name one of the prayers of the Church, which one would come to mind first?

For the first 30 years of my life, I think my response probably would have been the Hail Mary. As I was growing up, part of my family's religious practice was that we prayed the rosary daily, so by the sheer weight of repetition that was the prayer that stuck the most and the one I came to first.

Then, during my years in formation as a Franciscan I attended a retreat once that was based on the Our Father, and I came away with a new appreciation for the Lord's Prayer. One thing I noticed was that, regardless of the type of common prayer I'm involved in—the Mass, the Liturgy of the Hours (Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer), celebrating the Sacrament of Anointing—they all include the praying of the Our Father.

That says a lot! One of the ways the Church emphasizes the importance of a prayer is by how often we pray it.

This increasing attention to the value of praying the Our Father, though, has brought some pondering with it. One of the lines that has given me the most food for thought is the one, “and lead us not into temptation.”

For years I've wondered what that really meant. Apparently, I'm not alone. Turns out, over the course of the centuries, all the way back to St. Jerome and St. Augustine, the great theologians of the Church have spent a lot of time thinking about that and writing about it.

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The topic made it back into the news recently when Pope Francis approved a translation of the Our Father which has that line read “and do not let us fall into temptation.” His argument, at least as reported in USA Today, is,

“It is not a good translation because it speaks of a God who induces temptation. I am the one who falls. It’s not him pushing me into temptation to then see how I have fallen. A father doesn’t do that; a father helps you to get up immediately. It’s Satan who leads us into temptation, that’s his department.”

When we look at Jesus’ 40 days in the desert, it’s hard to ignore the statement that he was led there by the Holy Spirit. That’s how the gospel puts it. But even though temptation occurred, something else occurred also, which deserves attention.

Jesus proves his mettle, as it were. He shows himself capable of staying true to his mission in spite of all the temporary advantages that would come to him if he gave in to Satan.

When metal gets proved, it’s usually in fire. That’s where the dross that can weaken it gets burnt off and the metal comes through the proving stronger and more like its true self.

To prove, or to test, Jesus in the desert seems to have had the same effect. In that desolate place he had the chance to see clearly what sort of obstacles, what sort of

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temptations, would be there awaiting him when he returned to the world.

The temptations came in their most urgent form in that desert encounter, but they were still present in the more convoluted experience of preaching and teaching and healing where everything gets all mixed together.

Since the duration of Lent takes its cue from Jesus' 40 days in the desert this is an excellent time to allow ourselves, our mettle, to be proven, tested, tempered. The Lenten disciplines can bring us to that.

What sorts of thoughts come to us in the midst of feeling hungry, for example? Or how do we interact with others when we have to do without our favorite preoccupation? Sometimes our Lenten practices end up showing us a side of ourselves that normally goes unnoticed by us—but the “desert” of Lenten discipline can bring that out into the open.

If that should happen this Lent embrace the opportunity to keep it in view, to acknowledge it as a part of the complicated person you are and open up to the grace God has in store to help address it—not just for the forty days, but in the days and years that follow, too.

We will be the stronger for it. Our mettle will have been freed from the dross and impurities that can weaken our witness, and our life as Christian followers of Jesus will be the holier for it.