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'Lent is about coming home'

Following is the text of the homily delivered by Cardinal-designate Seán P. O'Malley at the closing Mass of the 2006 Boston Catholic Men's Conference.

The purpose of Lent is to jettison the ballast we carry through life, not in terms of shedding pounds by dieting, but letting go of the "extra baggage," those things that keep us separated from God and from others. Lent is a wake-up call, like Jonah's warning to the people of Nineveh. Lent is about coming home, like the prodigal son.

The geography of Lent begins on the shores of the Jordan River and moves quickly into the desert. The 30 years of our Lord's hidden life in the carpenter shop of Nazareth end and His public life begins at His baptism in the Jordan.

John the Baptist was baptizing sinners in the Jordan with the baptism of repentance. Jesus the sinless one appears on the shore. John the Baptist is embarrassed and says, "I ought to be baptized by you and yet you have come to me." Jesus had ceased to be hidden and began His public life. He had become revealed in the first place only to become more hidden — entering in the company of sinners who were waiting to confess their sins. Jesus receives the baptism of repentance of those sinners, putting Himself in their place. In anticipating the cross where Jesus places Himself in our stead, at the baptism there is also an anticipation of the resurrection and glorification. The Father's voice is heard, "You are my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased."

Today's Gospel says the Spirit drove Him into the desert. The desert is the centerpiece of the geography of Lent.

In the Scriptures the desert has two aspects or meanings. It is the place to encounter God and it is the place where people are tested, it is the place of temptations. Both Moses and Elijah had met God in the desert. Likewise, it was in the desert that the Israelites complained about God and built the golden calf to worship. The angels and wild animals mentioned in Mark's Gospel today symbolize these two aspects of the desert.

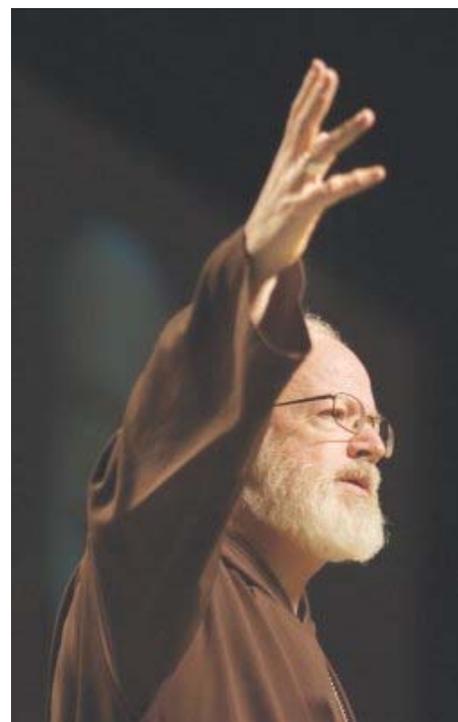
Jesus is in the desert on a retreat for 40 days, praying and fasting. There Jesus is tempted by Satan, but Jesus does not give in to the temptation to abandon His mission.

The Gospel says, "After John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee to preach the Gospel of God."

Herod the tyrant could silence the John witness, but not the Word made flesh. In a concise and purposeful way Mark gives us the essence of the Gospel message in today's reading that the Church offers for our meditation as we begin this holy season of Lent:

"This is the time of fulfillment. The Kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the Gospel."

We are called not to assert ourselves, but to conversion. What the Lord demands of us is that we be ready to change. He tells us to be foolish and not to conform to the normal attitudes of the society in



Cardinal-designate O'Malley speaks at the Boston Catholic Women's Conference March 3. Pilot photo by Peter Smith

which we live. In this way we are made free. It is in being changed and in penance that we discover the Gospel. The Kingdom of God is found in our conversion.

If we consider this text as a whole, we are inevitably struck by its contemporary urgency. It addresses us directly and leads to prayer and action.

Like Jesus we must learn to be led by the Spirit. Belief in God for many people today is more like a hangover. They feel the effects of the religious activities of the past, but their own consciousness borders on agnosticism. They still make space for God in our churches, but He is given very little space everywhere else.

A hundred years ago, when Friedrich Nietzsche made his declaration that "God is dead," he was not suggesting that God in the heavens had died. Nietzsche was saying that God no longer mattered in everyday life. "God is dead," he said, "but His shadow is a long one and we must first conquer this shadow."

These images of faith as a hangover, of religion as struggling with God's shadow, of an absent God whose calling card we still possess, describe in general the attitudes of many contemporary Christians living in a thoroughly secularized culture. For secularism there are no absolutes, there is no forever. We wake up in this world as orphans.

To be a believer is to have a Father, a God who loves us. That faith and knowledge can give us a strength and serenity that is unshakeable. In one of the Nazi death camps during the Second World War, a believer wrote on the wall:

I believe in the sun, even when it isn't shining.

I believe in love, even when I feel it not.

I believe in God, even when He is silent.

I know that for many God seemed silent during those awful times, but God is speaking in the heroism and goodness of so many people in those dehumanizing circumstances who shared their last crust of bread, who cared for the sick and dying and even forgave their persecutors.

Today, we celebrate the first Sunday of Lent in this vigil Mass. Lent is an old English four-letter word — In English the four-letter words are the strong ones — love, hate, plus all our good cuss words — Lent equals springtime.

Our Church needs a springtime, a spiritual springtime. Lent is our baptismal retreat — 40 days like Jesus after His baptism. A few weeks ago I sent a letter to all my priests asking them to plan their Lent so that for them personally it would be the best Lent of their whole life. I told them that as they tell us on the airplane — "In case of an emergency place your own oxygen mask on first then help the child or the person next to you." I asked all my priests to put their own oxygen masks on first — to make sure that they have a spiritual plan for Lent — more time and space for God in prayer and penance.

Today I want to make the same request of you — that you make this the best Lent ever in terms of your prayer life and the works of mercy and acts of penance that are supposed to characterize this holy season.

Pray in a special way for the thousands of new Catholics who tomorrow will gather at our Holy Cross Cathedral and all the cathedrals in the world. These are the adult converts to the faith who are in our RCIA programs — Rites of Christian Initiation of Adults. Tomorrow we will fill the cathedral twice with these converts to the Catholic faith and their sponsors. While some have stepped away from the practice of the Faith — there are others who are being drawn to be a part of our Church.

The Church needs for you, the Catholic men of Boston, to witness to our faith in Jesus and your love for His Church. Some people today think: "I am very spiritual, but I don't want anything to do with the Church, too many problems." But Jesus does not exist separately from the Church. He is the Bridegroom, never the widower. He came not to found a museum for saints, but a Church that would be a hospital for sinners.

In the New Testament the story of St. Paul's conversion is recounted four times. At the moment of his conversion Paul hates both Christ and His Church. He is on the way to Damascus persecuting the Church, arresting Christians. The risen Lord appears to Paul and says, "Saul, why are you persecuting me?" Paul says, "Who are you?" and Jesus replies: "I am the one you are persecuting." Jesus and the Church are one. That is the great insight Paul receives from the moment of his conversion and later develops his theology of the Church as the Body of Christ with Christ as the head. The individualism of our culture causes people to lose sight of the fact that Christ came to establish a Church, a community

of faith where we have responsibilities to God and to one another. We are the Body of Christ together. We must cultivate a unity and solidarity with our fellow believers, only then can we fulfill our mission.

The first two readings refer to Noah and the ark with an obvious reference to baptism. In the writing of the Fathers, Noah's Ark is often cited as an image of the Church. I think it is a great image. In fact I often feel like I am part of one big floating zoo. We are one billion Catholics and we come in all sizes, shapes and colors. We are all one in Christ Jesus.

One of the mystics said, "Love is an eye." For those of us who love the Catholic Church we see what a treasure Christ has left us. Our responsibility is to be witnesses in today's world. Too many Catholics have slipped into the witness protection program — we must invite them to come home to Christ and the Church.

The greatest treasure we have is the Eucharist.



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