

## FEBRUARY 20, 2026 FATHER MICHAEL COUTTS

Today, we celebrate, not the first Friday of the month, but the first Friday of Lent. And right at the beginning, we need to know the purpose of Lent. The prime purpose of Lent, of course, are the catechumens. They are going to be received into the Church with baptism, confirmation, and receiving the Eucharist for the first time at the Easter vigil.

Most of us were baptized as babies. Our parents, our godparents, made the vows for us, our baptismal vows. So, during this time of Lent, it is time for us to appropriate the vows that our parents and godparents made and to make sure that we fully acknowledge them.

The second purpose of Lent brings back to mind the Exodus experience. When the Israelites were freed from Egypt, and were taken into the wilderness to be taken to the promised land, they started by complaining and the Lord began to form them into a people. He led the by a fire, a cloud of fire by night and a pillar of cloud by day. And, gradually, these people formed into a cohesive group, and then God said, "You are my people. I am your God." He made a covenant with them and gave them The Torah, The Ten Commandments. And these are The Commandments that you and I have vowed at the time of our baptism to follow. "I promise to love God with all my mind, with all my heart, with my whole being, and my neighbour as I love God."

Now, the people of Israel said that they were a people of God, but they gradually made a detour. They got bored. They turned away from God. Which is also the story of all of us as well. We plan to walk in the path of the Lord, but every now and then, we decide, "Meh. We're gonna take a side turn." And then the Lord sends people into our lives like the

prophet Isaiah to say, "Come back to me with all your heart. Long have I waited for your coming back to me, living deeply our new life."

So, what is the ways of coming back to God? We had it only two days ago when we celebrated Ash Wednesday, prayer, fasting, and alms-giving, but the point is, this is exactly what Jesus condemned the scribes and the Pharisees, and for me as well. I can say prayers, but I can be a show-off in my prayers. I can take my breviary and walk down the corridors and everybody says, "Wow. He is saying his breviary." Or I can hold my rosary in my hand and walk down and say the rosary loud enough, and people are impressed, but that's a show.

The same thing with fasting. I might fast from meat and from all the other things, and then put a small portion on my plate and everybody looks at me and say, "You're eating like a chicken." And, finally, coming to alms-giving, and a good friend of mine says, "True alms-giving is giving in such a way that it does not concern whether it's tax-deductible or not." But I'm not gonna get down to that rabbit hole, because, we could have a whole lot of discussions in that direction.

I have a friend of mine, whenever he sends me a letter, it seems to shout out to me. He wrote to me, "I had a curry." And under the curry, he underlined it five different-- with five different lines. "And the curry was spicy." And the word "spicy" was written in capital letters, spaced out, "S-P..." and it went all the way down. And when he ended it, he put about six exclamation mark. It shouted out to me.

But this letter helped me to understand the way God called Isaiah. God said to him, "Cry out with your voice. Lift up your voice to the people. Declare to the people." Now, any one of those would've been sufficient. "Tell my people that they have to turn away from sin and be faithful to the gospel." But God not only does that, but He says, "Sound the

trumpet." The trumpet was only sound when there was a disaster, when there was a danger, or when an important announcement was to be made.

So God is telling Isaiah, "Tell my people that this is exactly what I want to do." And the people of Israel, as we heard, you know, "We fast and you don't watch. We give alms and you do not pay attention." They wanted God to affirm their fasting, their prayer, their alms-giving, which was worthwhile. But, unfortunately, Isaiah says, "All your works that you do are just a show. You want to impress people. They have no value whatsoever." And, Amos, who came before Isaiah would mention it in very concrete term. He says, "You keep the Sabbath? No, you wait until the Sabbath is over so that you can open your shops and do business again. When you sell things to people, you tamper with their sales-- -- with the scales and you give them poor stuff. You not only serve them corn, but with the husks as well, and you cheat people. This is not exactly taking care of fasting and taking care of the people."

Actually, what Isaiah said to the people of Israel, and Amos, is a thing that you and I do as well. You know, when I fast, I tend to be grumpy. I tend to be short-pa-- short in patience. I do not have time. And my spiritual director says, "Oh, for goodness sake, stop your fasting. Fast rather from being sarcastic and sharp-tongued. Sharp... sharp-- Fast exactly from being sad and depressed and showing a sad face. Fast exactly from, you know, complaining and being miserable all around." Show, rather, a face that will show to what exactly Jesus said. "When you fast, wash your face. Show a cheerful countenance."

And the late Pope Francis said the same thing indeed. He said, "Our fasting should be such that it'll continue to bring out the best within us, that reflects God within us. The true fasting will be fasting of such a type

that it will deepen our relationship with God." And not only deepen our relationship with God, but will be attacking the global indifference that people in our world today have towards the most vulnerable, the voiceless, and the poor people in our society.

This is what fasting means. It is to be a counterbalance with our heart that is generous, counterbalanced with a heart that is compassionate and caring for those in need. Turn away from sin and be faithful to the gospel. God bless you all.