

FEBRUARY 23, 2026 FATHER JOHN BERTAIO

After listening to these beautiful, long, life-giving readings on the first full week of Lent, let's start off with a very quick question, and that question is, "Do you allow the love of God to rule in your heart?"

St. Augustine of Hippo stated, and I quote, "Essentially, there are two kinds of people, because there are two kinds of love. One is holy, the other selfish. One is subject to God, the other endeavours to equal Him, equal God." End quote.

Jesus came not only to fulfill the love righteous, but to transform righteousness through his unconditional love and mercy toward each one of us. The Lord Jesus proved his love for us by offering up his life on the cross as the atoning sacrifice for our sins. His death brings freedom and life for us. Freedom from fear, selfishness, and greed. A new abundant life in the Holy Spirit who fills our hearts with the love of God.

So, do you allow God's love to purify you, your heart, and transform your mind to think, to act, and love others as the Lord Jesus has taught us through word and example?

On this day, the church also remembers St. Polycarp, who lived from about the year 69 to about 155, and I bring him up because he's very interesting to us. You see, he was bishop of Smyrna in the first half of the second century, and was martyred by the Pagan population of the town. His congregation wrote an account of his death in the form of a letter to a nearby Christian community and through this to the whole church.

So, this document or letter established the essential elements of the Cult of Martyrs, who, for several centuries, were the only Christians

recognized as saints after their death. Here is a very interesting point that I discovered. I think you probably will find it interesting as well, and that is that this document, it helped in founding the custom of observing the date of the death, meaning the birthing into Heaven, as the day on which the martyr was commemorated. When the Christian community would gather and celebrate, as opposed to the Pagans, who only celebrated the anniversary of the person's birth into this earth.

Today, many of us still celebrate, for example, the first nine days, 30 days, six months, and, of course, even one year, and then every year after that, the anniversary of the death of a loved one or someone who, as we say, has gone home, and they do it every year. So, let's give thanks to St. Poly—Polycarp and his community for passing such a meaningful tradition that many of us still honour to this day.

To conclude and back to our readings of today, as we begin the first full week of Lent, today's Gospel sets a profound tone, and it's so important for us to keep that in mind. While we often look ahead to Easter, today calls us to pause at this present moment. This moment we'll never have again.

We're called to an active love. Jesus says that, "Active love." To do something for someone in his name, out of love, not out of obligation, while they're still living, while they still need our help. You see, we are invited to move beyond complacency, not only through the Lenten discipline of prayer, but fasting and thanksgiving, but also through the words of Jesus today.

Again, and I stress, do you do something for someone not of obligation, but in the name of Christ? Especially this time of the year, when we celebrate Lent. When we live Lent, to do something out of love for Christ, whether it's someone you like or someone you don't like too

much, to say, "Here, in the name of Jesus, take this coupon and buy yourself whatever it is you wish to eat."

You see, in today's Gospel, It invites us, I think, to examine, for you and myself to examine our conscience so that at the end of the day we can truly, truly say and answer the question that Jesus might pose you one day. "Where did you see me today? Where did you feed me today? Where did you share your coat with me today?" He doesn't need it. We do it for him to others, through this time of Lent.

Please, be kind to one another, and of all times, at Lent is a good time to share God's love to the people you meet, and, as I said before, even to those you may not like too much, 'cause sometimes we judge. You see someone with a dirty coat, a ripped coat, share one with someone, and why not? Because doing that, you do it for Christ as we hear in the Gospel today. We do it for him, in his name, for his glory, and for our own salvation.

We can close with a prayer.

Lord Jesus, be the master and ruler of my life. May your love rule in my heart that I may only think, act, and speak with charity and do good for— to everyone I meet. Amen.