

Column030820

Companions on the Journey

March 8, 2020

Dear Friends,

We are two and a half weeks into the Penitential season of Lent. Usually, for me, it is right around this point that I begin to lose steam. Control can be pretty good for two weeks or so but then the good effort begins to wear down. The hunger pangs arise. I grow weary with the “extra effort” that sometimes Lent calls for. Mentally this is the point when the temptation voices start to be heard. It is not surprising that Jesus heard the voice of the tempter after he had been fasting for a good period of time. We begin to be susceptible to the voice that calls us to be less than our best self. It is this voice whose message is always the same: “You promised too much.” “You can’t do this.” We begin to turn a listening ear to what those voices might be offering. The dialogue begins. The interior debate between the “committed” me I was when Lent began and the “deprived” me of the present moment.

When I was younger I would pride myself with identifying a particular penance and staying on top of it for the full forty days. Problem was, that after I had been successful and seen my penance through to its conclusion I would then begin to revert to practices I engaged in before Lent. A lot of good my penance did for me, or so it seemed. As I have grown older and failed more I have learned how to lower the bar a bit—but just a bit, so that it still challenges me but I have a little bit of success going over it.

What I have learned is that a successful Lent really isn’t a Lent where I was perfectly in control and didn’t fail once. No, the successful Lent is the one where I failed, and maybe more than once, but didn’t stop trying, didn’t stop making the effort to stay on the course I set for myself as Lent began. That is the kind of success that lingers and sustains more so than the other where there was no failure. Failure is part of following the way of Christ. Read each of the gospels. You will see over and over again that those Jesus gathered to himself to become his disciples and even his apostles all had feet of clay. All failed him somewhere along the line. And some failed him many more times than once. And Jesus always reaches out to his failed disciples, extends to them a helping hand and reconstitutes them as his followers. We who seek to follow Christ are not perfect. For heaven’s sake, in the Catholic tradition we build confessionals and Reconciliation Rooms right into the architecture of our church buildings so there will be no doubt that we who

assemble here to pray are truly sinners in need of forgiveness and mostly of salvation.

My counsel to you is: Don’t give up. Especially if you are struggling with your decided upon penance. Do a restart for a shortened period of Lent. Get back in the saddle and continue to ride. It is precisely at this point in Lent that we begin to experience the true benefit of this season of self-denial and prayer.

Peace,
Msgr. McHenry