

March 1, 2020 – First Sunday of Lent

Gospel: Matthew 4:1-11

Ecological conversion and the challenge of the temptation in the desert

In *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis calls us to an ecological conversion in our efforts to care for our common home. Quoting his predecessor, he says “the external deserts in the world are growing, because the internal deserts have become so vast. For this reason, the ecological crisis is also a summons to profound interior conversion (LS, 217).” The desert is the setting of today’s Gospel—the place where Jesus is “led by the Spirit” and tempted by the Devil after 40 days and nights of fasting. The temptation in the desert gives us much to consider as we reflect on our own ecological conversion this first Sunday of Lent.



For those of us who have easy access to the abundance of material products produced by the global socio-economic order of our time, today’s Gospel and its theme of temptation are particularly significant. This is because, in many ways, that system and access to its products are part of what creates the need for ecological conversion in the first place.

Consider the first temptation Jesus faces—satisfy your hunger by turning stones into bread. Can we think of ways in which, through technological innovation, our society attempts to turn stones into bread? Efforts to interrupt the very logic of God’s Creation itself can result in terrible and unintended ecological consequences. Indeed, what turns stones into bread for the few may turn bread into stones for the many. For example, the imposition of industrialized agriculture on large swaths of the planet can have the effect of enriching a few, while impoverishing many.

The Devil tempts us, like he tempted Jesus to push the very limits of the created order, to cast himself off the cliff that he might be saved by the angels. Rather than choosing the call to ecological conversion, our world is increasingly choosing to recklessly jump off the cliff, believing that there is nothing we can do to God’s Creation that can cause irreparable harm to our souls. Even more dangerously, people fall into the trap of believing that the state of the world and the relationship between its peoples have no bearing on the state of our souls at all!

Finally, in the third temptation, Jesus is offered “All the kingdoms of the world” if he will only bow down and worship Satan. What do we do when we too are offered the domination of the planet and entire peoples by virtue of the places we occupy in the global socio-economic order? How do we respond when we are shown that our access to cheap consumer products comes with a human and environmental cost? The worship of Satan is the acceptance that this is simply the way of the world that we must accept. The refusal to do this is the path of ecological conversion. It is the path that recognizes, “the Lord, your God, shall you worship and him alone shall you serve.” We cannot serve God while assaulting each other and the earth in an ill-fated quest for worldly power and domination.

The temptations faced by Christ in the desert are faced by all people of the earth. But from the perspective of a call to ecological conversion, they are exceptionally present wherever what we often simply refer to as “privilege” exists. This Lent, let us pay extra attention to the need to address the interior deserts within us that leave us weak in the face of temptation and cultivate a *Laudato Si'* spirituality that can help us embrace the call to ecological conversion.

Author: Luke Stocking, Deputy Director of Public Engagement, Ontario and Atlantic Regions.

March 8, 2020 – Second Sunday of Lent

Gospel: Genesis 12:1-4a; 2 Timothy 1:8b-10; Matthew 17:1-9

“Lord, it is good for us to be here.”

Have you ever had a feeling that you were where you were meant to be, doing exactly what you were meant to be doing? If so, think of how this made you feel. Perhaps you felt at peace, or perhaps a sense of confidence. I think St. Peter may have felt the same way that you did when he spoke the words, “Lord, it is good for us to be here,” as he witnessed the Transfiguration all those years ago.

Today’s first two readings reveal that God calls each of us in a unique way, and so we *all* have the potential to have these “Lord, it is good for us to be here” moments. God guides us towards them by blessing each of us with a unique set of talents, relationships and opportunities. Understanding how to use these to answer God’s call for us requires reflection—opening our hearts and gearing our senses towards where God is calling us to go.

All too often, however, we meet obstacles on the road to fulfilling God’s plan for us. War could rip the rug out from under your feet. Climate change and the over-extraction of resources could leave you homeless or in such a state of poverty that the best you can do each day is to simply survive, never mind developing to your full spiritual and social potential. Norms and laws disfavour people based on gender, religion and culture, which could hold you back from contributing your talents to your community.

On this International Women’s Day, we celebrate the incredible women all over the world who have answered God’s call to bring about His Kingdom here on Earth, often bravely overcoming obstacles of discrimination to do so.

For example, today I celebrate Yesica Patiachi Tayori, the woman whose photo graces our campaign poster this year. She is an Indigenous community leader of the Harakbut people in Peru. Together with Development and Peace’s partner, CAAAP, she is leading her people’s effort to protect themselves and the Peruvian Amazon rainforest where they live.



It is good for her to be there.

The Harakbut people appointed Yesica to tell Pope Francis their story when he visited Puerto Maldonado, Peru, in January 2018. She was then invited to the Vatican to contribute her knowledge and experience to the Synod of Bishops for the Pan-Amazon Region in October 2019. And it was good for her to be there, too.

I am inspired by Yesica, because she has answered God’s call to everyone—to love Him and to love our neighbour—in her own unique way, by raising the voices of her people and, in doing so, bravely amplifying the cry of the poor and of the Earth.

Let’s ensure that *everyone* has a chance to answer God’s call to them. And on this International Women’s Day, let us be especially mindful that women *must* have equal opportunities as men to use their unique gifts to build the Kingdom. And let us also remember that God has a plan for *all* our sisters and brothers, however distant and different they may seem to us and however far their views may be from our own.

At the end of the day, let’s always remember that it is good for ALL of us to be here.

Author: Rebecca Rathbone, Animator for South-West Ontario.

March 15, 2020 – Third Sunday of Lent

Gospel: John 4:5-42

Two thirsts meet

Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon. (John 4:6)

Noon. Not the best time to fetch water; it's too hot. But it will be quick because the woman knows she never meets anyone at this hour. It's better this way. But, today, there is someone there; a man, a stranger....

There are stories in the Gospel of unexpected and un hoped-for encounters.

Who would have thought that on that day Jesus would have crossed Samaria to return to Galilee? Everyone knows it's better to take the detour than risk meeting Samaritans.

Who would have thought that he would have spoken to a woman; a woman like that, some would say? A Samaritan woman; a woman who, one can immediately guess, lives on the fringe of her community. Here, Jesus breaks the rule that a man is not to speak in public to lone women, let alone a Samaritan woman.

Who would have believed that he would make the first move? He was so thirsty. He needed her. A Jew who needs a Samaritan woman? What a grace it is to need others! And she, he guessed, was even thirstier than he. That day, *two thirsts met: those of the road-wearied Jesus and a woman who, at mid-day, came to draw water for her family.*

Jesus approaches the woman with such respect and humility. He knows the depths of human thirst and that is why he does not hesitate to cross the borders and prohibitions that divide humans. Jesus and the woman take the time to get to know each other, each listening to the other's real need. In this exchange, asking and receiving are intertwined; we move from ignorance to mutual recognition. What grace!

In the Bible, wells are highly symbolic meeting places. One can guess that this story will end in something worth understanding. *How can we continue it today?* Our road to Easter crosses the Amazon. It's worth a halt. Let's take our turn to make the time for an encounter.

Before the *Synod for the Amazon* and the *For our Common Home* campaign, we knew neither the name nor the

existence or struggles of the Mura people of Brazil. Today we have heard about them, we even know a few names and faces like *Francisco Oliverra da Silva* and *Greicivani dos Santos da Silva*. We know that they are the *defenders of the Amazon rainforest, the protectors of the Earth*. What if knowing their names and their existence changed something for them and for us? What if it gave a sacred meaning to our Share Lent?



We know that their way of life is threatened by intensive livestock farming and mining, and we know a little more about their struggle against land grabbing, deforestation and river pollution. They have become our partners.

On this Samaritan Sunday, our encounter with them takes on a rather special complexion. Here we are, virtually face-to-face, conscious of needing each other, of being interconnected.

This week, let's move from ignorance of the Mura to recognizing them. The best we have to offer them is our fraternal solidarity with *their joys and their hopes, their sadness and their anguish* about their future and that of their children. It is as if the story of the Samaritan woman continued today, through our encounter with this people.

Our Solidarity Letter*, our prayer and our donations bring us closer to their dream of peace, justice, joy and abundant life. It is in the Gospel that our motivations and commitment are rooted and that we discover that it is at the heart of our daily thirst, struggles and hopes that the Good News can arise.

Author: **Françoise Lagacé, Member of the National Council.**

*Sign the Solidarity Letter at devp.org/act.

Lenten Weekly Reflections

March 22, 2020 – Fourth Sunday of Lent

Gospel: John 9:1-41

“Blindness” and the *seringueiros* of Machadinho d’Oeste, Brazil

Sight is one of the Creator’s greatest gifts. While we apprehend the world through physical sight, we need spiritual sight to truly comprehend it.

In restoring the blind man’s sight, Jesus refuses to deem his affliction a consequence of sin. From Jesus’s response to the Pharisees, we learn that the true sin is spiritual blindness.

There are none so blind as those *will* not see.

The age-old story of sight and blindness is echoing in the dwindling Amazon rainforest. In Brazil’s Rondônia State, the *seringueiro* artisanal rubber tappers ply their traditional trade and gather nuts and fruits on small state-recognized reserves. They are an abandoned, persecuted people. The state provides them almost no education or health services. Worse still, their lands, livelihoods and very lives are threatened by powerful logging and industrial farming interests.



Extreme poverty, poor education and oppression might have blinded the *seringueiros* to everything but immediate survival and basic needs. Yet, they have a most expansive vision of the rainforest and their place in it. They see their beloved forest as a divine benediction. They see how the health of their terrain is tied to the ecological health of the Earth. They see themselves as custodians holding the forest in trust for all humankind.

Contrast them with the Brazilian state. With a robust bureaucracy on the ground and advanced satellites in space, it is as well-informed and all-seeing as a state can be. Yet, it turns a blind eye to the plight of the *seringueiros* and other menaced traditional and Indigenous defenders of the

rainforest. It favours giant corporations that only see short-term profit, making it ever easier for them to log, mine, farm, dam and pillage the forest. Together, the government and the corporations promote this rapacious exploitation as a vision of development.

We in the West, too, sometimes suffer from blindness. We fail to see how our consumerism drives the demand for resources and, thereby, the destruction of the Amazon rainforest and other ecological hotspots. With “blind confidence in technical solutions (*Laudato Si’*, 14),” we blithely ignore mounting scientific evidence for an impending ecological crisis. Isn’t our refusal to change our habits, to consume less, to tread lightly on the Earth a form of spiritual blindness?

Offering an exit from this unseeing state, Pope Francis reminds us that “Living our vocation to be protectors of God’s handiwork is essential to a life of virtue; it is not an optional or a secondary aspect of our Christian experience (*Laudato Si’*, 217).”

To live this essential aspect of our Christian experience, we must heed the Holy Father’s call to “ecological conversion” and reconnect with Creation. We must stand in solidarity with the *seringueiros*. They are a people gifted with remarkable spiritual sight. Like the blind man’s restored sight contradicted the Pharisaic order, the *seringueiros*’ vision contradicts prevailing ideas of development and progress. Undeterred, they hold on to it as a matter of faith.

Surely, our support is due to organizations that defend them and other defenders of the Amazon. They are the ones “who tirelessly seek to resolve the tragic effects of environmental degradation on the lives of the world’s poorest (*Laudato Si’*, 13).”

This path to a life of virtue is a path of humility, simplicity, sacrifice, *caritas* and almsgiving. Though arduous, this path is illumined. For our Lord has said, “I am the light of the world.”

Author: Minaz Kerawala, Communications and Public Relations Advisor.

March 29, 2020 – Fifth Sunday of Lent

Solidarity Sunday

Gospel: John 11:1-45

The quiet tears and divine power of Jesus

Today's readings are full of God's mercy and compassion for humanity. By this compassion and mercy, the Spirit of God breathes life into that which otherwise dies. The Gospel in particular, is a beautiful expression of the intimacy of Jesus with our human condition and its redemption. Lazarus and his sisters, Martha and Mary, are loved by Jesus. He decides to go to them even though his life may be put at risk. His disciples ask if he really wants to go back to Judea, where people had just tried to stone him. He does.

Do we have the courage to follow Jesus to be close to those whom he loves when it means putting ourselves in danger with Him? Like Thomas, can we say, "Let us also go to die with him"? What are we willing to sacrifice in our own lives to follow Jesus to help those at risk of violence and death? These are questions we must challenge ourselves with to truly be his disciples.

"Jesus wept," is popularly known as the shortest passage in scripture. In just two words, the humanity of the Christ is captured. Jesus knew he was to raise Lazarus from the dead. We may wonder why he still cried at the death of Lazarus. The Greek verb in the sentence, *δακρῦω* (*dakruó*), is best described as the shedding of quiet tears. It is not a loud sobbing or lamentation. They are the tears you only notice on a second look. One can imagine the Lord taking in the suffering of Mary and Martha at the loss of their brother. Not only their sadness but that of everyone around him would have been palpable. In the fullness of his humanity, Jesus feels the loss of his friend, Lazarus. He feels the grief, but, I believe, the source of his tears is much larger.

I like to imagine that at this moment Jesus experienced, in the deepest of ways, our human condition. He felt and saw the tyranny of death in the world when he lost someone he loved. He saw and felt what death can do to his creation—that by virtue of being created by and for love, human beings must necessarily suffer loss and pain. The quiet tears come to him.

And then, from those quiet tears, the divine power comes forward. Filled with the confidence that his Father will

hear him, Jesus exhibits a most unhuman-like ability. With the words, "Lazarus come out!" he raises the one he loves from the dead in the presence of a great crowd.

Like Jesus, our own quiet tears for the suffering of the world should not leave us powerless to act. They should fill us with a holy longing to call on the power of God. When we are moved by the victims of poverty, violence, hunger and disaster, we too can draw on that power to act. We may not be able raise the dead like Jesus, but we can still, as the poem of Wendell Berry says, "practice resurrection." We can give of ourselves in the service of others and the vision that death is never the final word.

On this Solidarity Sunday, Development and Peace — Caritas Canada invites you to join us in shedding quiet tears for the poor and oppressed, filling ourselves with divine power and saying to our Creator, "I thank you for hearing me."



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Lenten Weekly Reflections

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Lent 2020



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April 5, 2020 – Sixth Sunday of Lent

Palm Sunday of the Passion of the Lord

Gospel: Matthew 26:14–27:66 or 27:11–54

The Joy of the Gospel at the heart of our faith

The same words and actions that transformed the lives of poor and rich alike in Jesus' time continue to ignite the hearts of people worldwide today. As the mass begins today, we too stand by the road as Jesus enters Jerusalem, greeting him with the crowd in song and joy. Darker clouds are on the horizon. In today's Gospel, we experience the Passion of the Christ through the voice of Saint Matthew. We are reminded that God, who has the power to move mountains, chose to enter the world as a human being. Not only was he born in a stable and rejected by his community, he was eventually condemned to death by those he came to save. Why would God do this? In part, it was necessary in order to share the Good News with humanity in a way that we could understand and intimately connect to – life, death and resurrection – this is *The Joy of the Gospel*.

Through this lens, we can better appreciate some of Pope Francis' recent writings; how they often mimic Christ's humility, accessibility and urgency in a way that speaks to some of our modern-day concerns. Two examples are his first Apostolic Exhortation *The Joy of the Gospel*, and the encyclical *Laudato Si': On Care for our Common Home*. Both documents invite us to look past our existential and material distractions (many of which are exacerbated by our modern lifestyles) towards the heart of our faith. What can we learn by discovering, renewing or reinvigorating our relationship with both the Gospel and creation?

In *The Joy of the Gospel*, the message is clear: we must set forth on a “new chapter of evangelization marked by...joy” and a “renewed encounter with Jesus.” Throughout the exhortation, Pope Francis continually guides the reader towards an examination of conscience. Whether offering advice to avoid the lure of pessimism or suggesting that “our church doors should always be open,” he provides an often gentle (and sometimes less so) reminder that an active, effective church cannot thrive in a vacuum. He famously desires “a church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security.” In the Gospel today, this is the Christ we encounter. We meet him as the one who enters the Holy City with humble joy and soon finds himself bruised & hurting because he chose to reject the security of his divinity by taking human form.



Pope Francis repeatedly connects this “field hospital” evangelization to the social mission of the church, particularly our treatment of the poor. To fully live *The Joy of the Gospel* we must (to the best of our abilities) mimic the attitude and behaviour of Jesus towards those living in poverty or isolation. The Holy Father also calls for the church community to help “eliminate the structural causes of poverty and to promote the integral development of the poor.” Are we willing to enter the Holy City as Jesus does, ready to encounter those who do not share *The Joy of the Gospel* and to suffer at their hands?

Although *Laudato Si'* appears to focus on the environment and the integral relationship between humans, nature, and God, the foundations laid by *The Joy of the Gospel* are clearly present. The Pope reminds us that the gift of creation is something we must defend, nurture and appreciate. We are caretakers of God's creation, not landlords. He asks us to take a step back from the consumer-driven nature of our society and reflect on how our lifestyles affect not only our planet and each other, but also our spiritual development. We risk forgetting the importance of our environment when we limit our interaction with it, just as we risk losing our faith if we don't nurture it. We are asked to apply that same spirit of joy towards our care for creation.

By following in Jesus' footsteps, Pope Francis helps us demystify and better understand some of the most profound elements of our faith. If we take these messages to heart, we are better able to witness to the true power, beauty and joy of our faith. This Sunday, as we prepare for Easter, we remind ourselves of the enormous sacrifice that Jesus made, and how the words and deeds of a humble carpenter from Nazareth still captivates the world 2,000 years later.

Author: Jeremy Laurie, Animator for British Columbia and Yukon.