

Homily for the First Sunday of Lent
March 10, 2019
Deacon Bill Pitocco

Remembering Our Past Keeps Our Future Safe

I'm going to be talking to you today about first fruits and one of my "first fruits" for lent is the Ignite Campaign so I wanted to mention this to you first today! The typical Diocesan capital campaign happens once every 15 to 20 years or so. Our diocese last had one in 1999 to build the Co-Cathedral. The church knows we all give to our Parish offertory every week and to the DSF and that that giving is essential to the financial well-being of the parish and the Archdiocese. Today and for the next few months, the Cardinal asks that as we think about our first fruits, that we consider including the IGNITE campaign and consider its benefits here and across the Archdiocese. The campaign will allow us to build our Church through the Seminary, our Catholic Schools and through Lay Ministry. We will also help those in need with funding for Harvey relief as well as preparing for future disasters. Christine Goodwin, our campaign representative, will be at the hospitality breakfast in the PLC after this Mass. Please stop by and speak to her and gather more information.

Well, we are 5 days into lent, has giving up something or taking on something brought you closer to Jesus! What we are "offering up", what

we give up or take on for Lent should be something we do first, with gladness and out of gratitude to him versus something we struggle through. And as we practice this, we'll feel closer to him and feel his presence standing right by our side! The tradition of offering to God the "first fruits," which Moses establishes in today's first reading, was a key spiritual practice in ancient Israel. It was how they kept in tune with God. And whenever they slacked off in this practice, they ended up drifting away from God and being attacked by their enemies. What were these "first fruits" that Moses taught the Israelites to offer to God? They were the first batch of the annual harvests. Whether olives, grapes, or grains, when harvest time came, the farmers would bring the very first batch of produce to the tabernacle, or the Temple, and offer it to God. They wouldn't just offer to God the "leftovers"; they would offer the "first fruits." Moses points out the two reasons behind this practice: justice and hope. It was a matter of justice, because the land that produced those harvests, the Promised Land, had been miraculously given to the Israelites by God. They owed God everything. Giving him the first fruits acknowledged this. It was also a matter of hope. The happiness they longed for could only come from God, not from any merely earthly wealth and prosperity. Offering God their first fruits reminded them of this too, that no amount of material prosperity or pleasure could give them the fulfillment that comes from friendship with God. The offering

of first fruits, in other words, helped the Israelites remember the true context of their lives. They were part of a bigger story, the story of God's salvation, a story that had roots in the past and would reach its climax in the future. And so, by remembering their past, they kept their future safe.

The same thing goes for us. We too are part of a bigger story, the story of salvation, and Lent is a season meant to remind us of this bigger context of our lives. This biblical view of life contrasts sharply with the predominant view of life surrounding us in popular culture. The world's culture today promotes this I or Me centered mentality. Wherever we are, according to this mentality, we hold everything that matters in the palm of our hand. We have immediate access to everything at every moment. We are the center of the universe, everything revolves around us, everything is at our fingertips, right now. I am not saying that technology is evil. Technology is enabling us to do great things but when life becomes all about the me and me in the moment, then life is no longer a journey, with a beginning, middle, and end. Rather, life is a series of momentary impressions and experiences that blend into each other and keep us focused on our passing feelings and urges. But the mentality that goes along with this ME centered society has this tendency to exhaust us, to steal our interior peace, to stress us out and to put us on the roller-coaster of rootless me-centeredness, cutting us

off from the bigger picture. The biblical world view, the one we see exemplified in the tradition of offering to God the "first fruits," is the exact opposite of the "Me" mentality. It is the "Rooted in You" mentality. Rooted in our God!

We have been created and redeemed by God. He has adopted us into his family, which includes all the saints from past and future ages. He has given each one of us a role to play in the story of salvation. and while we are here on earth, we have a chance to store up treasure in the future, in heaven, by loving God with all our hearts and loving our neighbors as ourselves. and this is what the Church wants to remind us of during Lent. We have to keep it in mind to avoid being swept away by a self-indulgent and self-centered mentality that, unless we are careful, will gradually distance us from God. We are to be in the world but not of it.

This practice of offering to God our first fruits didn't go away when Moses died. In fact, it happens, on two levels, at every Mass all over the world! After the general intentions, at the end of the Liturgy of the Word, comes the part of the Mass known as the offertory. During the offertory, the congregation contributes their own offerings. We are meant to put in not just our leftovers, but our first fruits, acknowledging our dependence on God and gratitude towards him, and exercising our hope in the eternal happiness he has in store for us. That's the first level. All

of those offerings are symbolically included in the bread and wine that are then placed on the altar. In the Liturgy of the Eucharist, the priest blesses these, and then prays over them. During this Eucharistic prayer, Jesus himself becomes present under the appearances of bread and wine. And at the end of the Eucharistic Prayer, the priest lifts up the Body of Jesus and the Deacon lifts up the Blood of Jesus and the priest says the doxology: "Through him, with him, in him..." At that moment, we, the People of God in his Church, are offering to the Father not just the first fruits of our own labors, which are contaminated by our selfishness, but the first fruits of the redeemed human race: Jesus himself.

Jesus offered himself perfectly to the Father on the cross, and at Mass, that offering is made present so that we can unite our imperfect offerings to him. That is the power of the Mass. That's why coming to Mass during lent can be such a beneficial devotion: it keeps us plugged into the bigger picture – it grounds us in knowing that Christ is always near us, leading us to the future, in ways that are everlasting not fleeting, He is always near us, every moment, every day and throughout our entire life time, standing right by our side!