

LENTEN PROGRAM 2020

# Grace.







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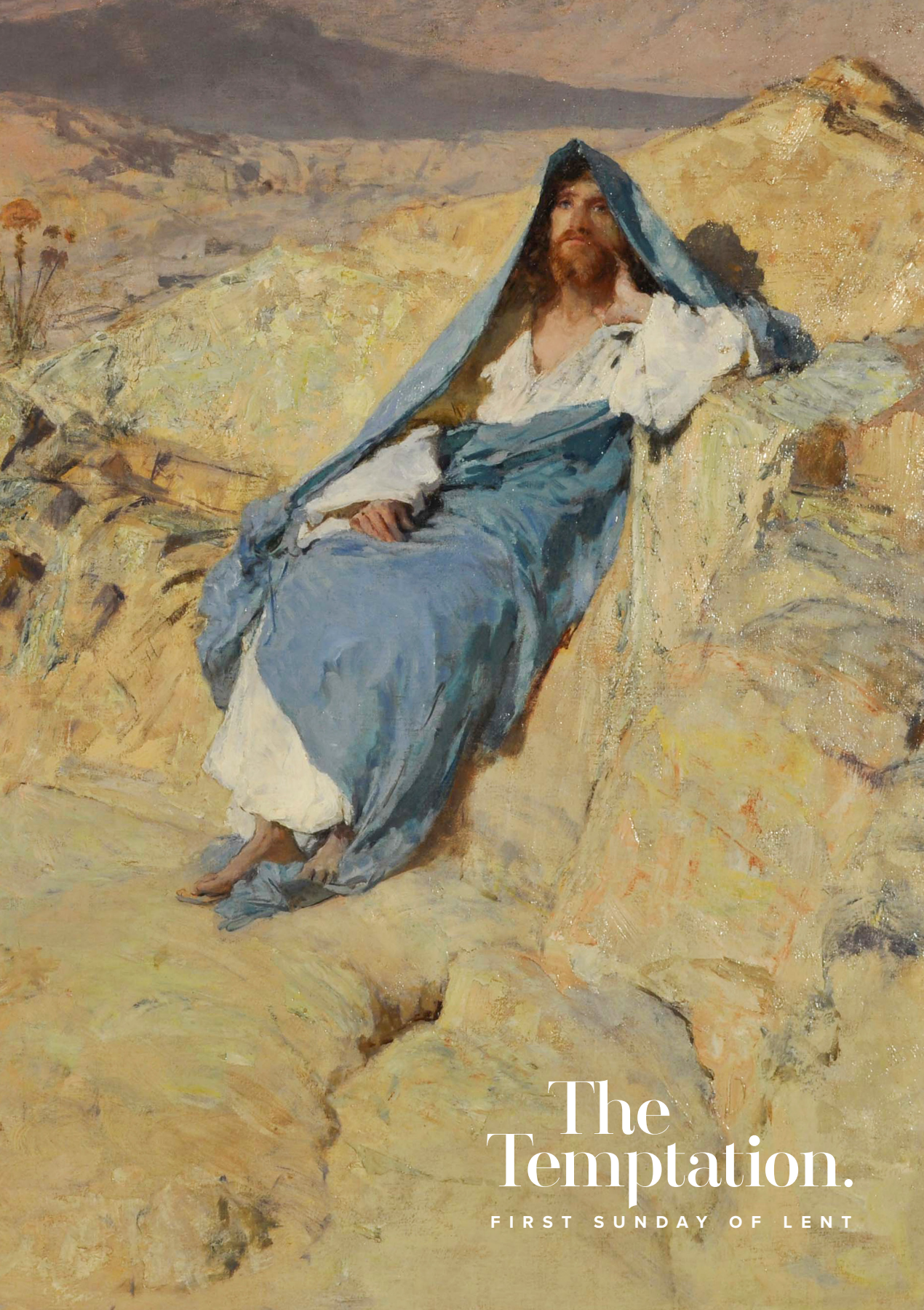
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# The Temptation.

FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT





### The Temptation of Christ

**Domenico Morelli (1823–1901)**

“The Temptation of Christ”, c. 1885.

Oil on canvas, 79 x 118.5 cm.

Private collection, Italy.

Heritage Images / Fine Art Images / ak-g-images.

**MGR GRAHAM SCHMITZER**

It is to be remembered that the readings of Year A of Lent are the original ones assigned by the early Church for the celebration of this sacred season—a season aimed primarily at those intending to join the Church at Easter. These were the final lessons of a long process of initiation. New Christians were soon to “take the plunge.”

Most of us using this program, better called a “process”, are not new Christians, but older ones, and time may have blunted our perspective. We may have, over the years, entered a comfort zone, forgetting that if the Gospel is not a perennial challenge, it has ceased to be a Gospel (good news). For what is the good news? What do non-Christians see in me? Hopefully, that Christ has liberated me.

Lent is *renewal*. In the Northern Hemisphere, from which our liturgy was born, Spring is about to reawaken. We are familiar with the term “spring cleaning”. The cobwebs are about to be swept away. What are the cobwebs in my life? Have I allowed certain realities to cloud my focus? I’m busy—no time for prayer, especially on Sunday; my career has dominated my personal and family life; I’m compromised by a world that has forgotten Christ; I’ve allowed the temptations of life to take over my reason.

What is Domenico Morelli trying to say to me? He belongs to the 18<sup>th</sup> century—an Italian painter who

produced mainly historical or religious works. He was born of a poor family, and his mother had hoped he would become a priest. He was involved in the insurrection of 1848 which erupted in Naples. After his death, he was labelled as one of the warrior artists of Italy. Is this reflected in the painting we are contemplating—a battle?

The landscape is desert, not a slice of green to be seen. Christ seems to be in a completely relaxed mode, an attitude of prayer, engrossed in conversation with his Father. Fasting has not emaciated him. He seems completely in control.

But, on the left is the Tempter. In Latin, “left” is *sinistra*, from which we get our word “sinister”. It is hard to know exactly what Morelli is trying to depict. Is the “creature” male or female? What does it matter—Satan is depicted as prophesied in the book of Genesis: “On your belly you will go, and on dust you will feed as long as you live” (Gn 3:14).

Satan crawls to us. It is good to remember this. He is never in full control, for God has not allowed this. He crawls, for he is offering us lies: “You will be like gods, knowing good from evil” (Gn 3:5), he says to Adam and Eve. But, this is the prerogative of God. We can never understand fully in this life.

So, why do we listen to him? I am reminded of a poem by John Donne, reproduced in the American Breviary, in which he suggests that, because of original sin, reason proves weak in me (*Holy Sonnets* V). It has betrothed me to my enemy. The poem calls upon God to divorce me from this union and to ravish me with his love.

In 2018, the Paulist Press in New York published a book written by the now-retired Cardinal Walter Kasper. He had led the Council for Promoting Christian Unity. He makes a statement that could well inspire our celebration of Lent: “You have infinite worth, for God loves you from all eternity, affirms your existence, holds you, and sustains you. You matter because God is crazy about you and wants to live in communion with you forever” (*Seasons of Grace: A Spiritual Companion to the Liturgical Year*, p. 77).

If we can just be convinced of this, then we shall sail through Lent like Christ in the painting—confident of God’s nearness, Satan having no control over us whatsoever. ■

# 1 MARCH 2020

1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Lent

GENESIS 2:7-9, 3:1-7  
PSALM 50(51):3-6, 12-14, 17  
ROMANS 5:12-19  
MATTHEW 4:1-11

## OPENING PRAYER

Host: Let us pause and call to mind  
God's presence within and among us,  
today and always.

*Brief pause.*

**All:** Good and loving God,  
source of every grace and blessing,  
as we gather for our Lenten  
group discussions,  
we place ourselves before you,  
for you are filled with beauty and light  
and you care deeply for each one of us.

Help us to listen before speaking.  
Help us to respect and understand  
the opinions of others.  
Help us to trust one another and share  
with openness and vulnerability.

May your light enfold us.  
May your Spirit guide us.  
May your grace abound in us.

We make this prayer through  
Christ our Lord. Amen.

## RESPONSORIAL PSALM

PSALM 50(51):3-6, 12-14, 17

**R.** Be merciful, O Lord,  
for we have sinned.

Have mercy on me, God, in your kindness.  
In your compassion blot out my offence.  
O wash me more and more from my guilt  
and cleanse me from my sin. **R.**

My offences truly I know them;  
my sin is always before me  
Against you, you alone, have I sinned;  
what is evil in your sight I have done. **R.**

A pure heart create for me, O God,  
put a steadfast spirit within me.  
Do not cast me away from your presence,  
nor deprive me of your holy spirit. **R.**

Give me again the joy of your help;  
with a spirit of fervour sustain me,  
O Lord, open my lips  
and my mouth shall declare your praise. **R.**

## GOSPEL

MATTHEW 4:1-11

Jesus was led by the Spirit out into the wilderness  
to be tempted by the devil. He fasted for forty  
days and forty nights, after which he was very  
hungry, and the tempter came and said to him,  
"If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to  
turn into loaves." But he replied, "Scripture says:

*Man does not live on bread alone but on every  
word that comes from the mouth of God."*

The devil then took him to the holy city  
and made him stand on the parapet of the  
Temple. "If you are the Son of God" he said  
"throw yourself down; for scripture says:

*He will put you in his angels' charge, and  
they will support you on their hands in  
case you hurt your foot against a stone."*

Jesus said to him, "Scripture also says:

*You must not put the Lord your God to the test."*

Next, taking him to a very high mountain, the  
devil showed him all the kingdoms of the world  
and their splendour. "I will give you all these" he  
said, "if you fall at my feet and worship me." Then  
Jesus replied, "Be off, Satan! For scripture says:

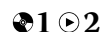
*You must worship the Lord your  
God, and serve him alone."*

Then the devil left him, and angels  
appeared and looked after him.

The Gospel of the Lord.

**All: Praise to you Lord Jesus Christ.**

*Pause for silent reflection.*



## Jesus was led by the Spirit.

FR CHRISTOPHER G SARKIS

As she does every year, the Church calls her children to begin their Lenten preparation for the greatest of all her feasts: the death and resurrection of our Saviour, our Lord Jesus Christ. For the next 40 days, the Church, through her liturgies and readings, reminds us that we are a pilgrim people; a people on a journey, but no ordinary journey. It is a journey, quite literally, about life and death—our life and our death. On these two realities is our Lenten journey based. That journey begins with the moment of our conception and will continue until the moment of our death. In that sense, therefore, the more intense preparation that we undertake during Lent should reflect the continuous preparation of our whole lives.

This prospect can be daunting. Indeed, the enormity of what is at stake—our eternal salvation—can, by its very challenge, cause us to be so overwhelmed that we recoil from it. For that very reason, we have need of regular and concentrated periods of spiritual preparation such as Lent. We also need encouragement to persevere in this pilgrim journey to avoid spiritual tiredness, and even more importantly, spiritual complacency—that feeling of, “I’ve done all this before, so I’ll be a bit easier on myself this Lent.”

One important way of doing this is to have a plan or a framework for Lent—one that is not so difficult that it is unrealistic, yet at the same time, not so easy that it doesn’t require any real sacrifice from us. May I suggest we move from the focus of, “What will I *give up* this lent?” to “What will I *take up* this lent?” Our prayer, fasting and almsgiving needs to be a positive thing to enable us to grow spiritually, rather than a negative thing that weighs us down.

The whole focus of our Lenten preparation is Jesus, the Son of God, who by his death and resurrection has forgiven, saved and redeemed us. But, we can only focus on Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit. In his own sacred humanity, this was true

for Jesus, himself, as he faced his mission to redeem the human race. Hence, St Matthew tells us in today’s Gospel that Jesus—in commencing his own 40-day preparation in the wilderness—was “led by the Spirit”. Only by the power of the Spirit could he resist the temptations of the devil, climaxing in his ultimate victory over death on Calvary and winning for us our salvation. It is foolish and naïve, and sinfully arrogant, if we think that we can undertake our 40-day Lenten preparation without also being “led by the Spirit”.

During Lent, the devil—who is very real—knows that we are especially concentrating on Jesus, and so he will try even harder to tempt us in all sorts of ways, just as he did to Jesus in the desert. I have long believed that the devil is most active in the heart of the Church, because that’s where most of his customers are, and as any sales representative knows, you go to where your business is. The devil’s business is committed Christians who take their faith seriously—that’s you and me. So, don’t be fooled into a false sense of security. You will be tempted in all sorts of subtle but intense ways this Lent.

*The temptation of turning stones into bread:* “Don’t worry about prayer, penance and self-denial—indulge yourself in that extra little luxury. Go on, it won’t hurt you!” But, giving into it makes it that much easier to give in to the next temptation to sin, too.

*The temptation to test God:* “Nothing is impossible for you God, so do this for me first and then I’ll make the sacrifice you ask; then I’ll take up my cross and follow you. Come on, let’s strike a bargain; a price. How much is my faith and obedience worth?” And, in despair, Judas cast the 30 pieces of silver onto the treasury floor and ran out.

*The temptation of earthly power and glory; of pride and vanity:* “Don’t listen to that rubbish about the need to go to Confession! You try to live a good life and have no real sins to confess—not big ones anyhow—just the usual little human weaknesses. Harmless really. All this talk of sin and Confession is just the Church’s way to keep us in our place and cut away at our self-esteem.” And, pride cast Satan down to hell.

Yes, we will each be tempted in our own way and by our own particular and personal demons. We will fail unless we are led by the Holy Spirit. So, this week, pray every day to the Holy Spirit to fill you; pray for the strength and the grace to resist

temptation, sin and evil. Pray to stand strong in the face of the devil and his cunning and subtle temptations. Keep your eyes firmly focused on Jesus, for: “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (Rm 10:13). But, first we must call, and we can only call if we are filled with the Holy Spirit and his grace.

Let Mary, the Mother of the Lord, accompany us on this Lenten journey. Let the Spirit of God fill us with his grace so that what we profess with our lips we may believe with our heart and practise in our life. ■

### REFLECTION QUESTIONS

*Jesus was led by the Spirit*

- Fr Christopher reminds us that we need a “plan or a framework for Lent”, but he cautions us to not to make it so hard that it becomes unachievable, nor too easy that we experience no growth. What would be a good plan for spiritual growth during Lent?
- Jesus was tempted in various ways—providing us with a model for how the devil might seek to tempt us. What is the best way to respond to temptation?
- What are some ways that we can fix our eyes on Jesus this Lent?

## SPIRITUAL DIRECTION



### In the wilderness.

SR ANASTASIA REEVES OP

**H**ave you ever been to the desert? I once spent a few days in the Tanami Desert (Australia). The untouched beauty and vivid colour were enthralling, but in the absence of the usual distractions, the silence and solitude were also confronting. I began to hear a quiet, yet distinct high-pitched ringing in my ears and realised, this is the sound of silence. I remember longing to spend time in the stone church built by the local

Aboriginal people and the missionaries. In this place, like no other, I could really hear God.

No wonder some of the early Christians used to imitate Christ by going to the desert, not just for 40 days, but for years, to fast, pray and “face their demons”, so to speak. They knew that in the desert they could be with God and hear him. They could offer their lives for love of him and for the salvation of the world. Alone with God, they would battle against their sins and the temptations of the evil one, because in the desert they could not help but see themselves as they really were. Nevertheless, slowly, they grew to love the desert because they could draw closer and closer to Love itself.

Now, I don’t know many people who could spend 40 days alone in the desert, let alone fast while they were there. I’m glad we have milder forms of Lenten fasting, prayer and almsgiving. Even still, in the very tame, modern Lenten desert, it is still difficult. I fail in my resolutions. I find that I cannot improve myself, or that I do so only marginally, and even that requires much effort. I can barely make miniscule sacrifices. And, this has made me realise: *I really* need a Saviour. I need grace. I need God to empower me to do anything, even those things I think I can do on my own. And, that is the point of Lent—for each of us to humble ourselves, realising that we are totally dependent on God. By turning back to him, we can receive the graces we need to love him, to love those he has placed in our lives, and to be our best selves—the saints he created us to be.

As Lent takes us into the desert with Jesus, the Sacrament of Confession is a particular emphasis in Lent—a very focused desert moment of depending on him. In confessing our sins aloud to Christ present in the priest, we are able to concretely acknowledge our weakness, sin, guilt and shame, and our immense need of God’s forgiveness. It is a catharsis, allowing us to reveal to God what he already knows about us. We see our fragility, which he sees too, but in his tender presence, he loves us, forgives us, and strengthens us.

We all desire this—to reveal our unmasked self to someone who will not reject us, but who will love us unconditionally, despite our utter fragility. Our contemporary culture provides ample evidence of this in the constant self-disclosure facilitated by social media. We present a digital personality to



the world, hoping for affirmation. And, all the time, we can go to Christ in the Sacrament of Confession, not needing to present anything but our true selves—confident of his tender welcome.

This Lent, there is no need for dramatic sacrifices. Instead, take time in prayer to look toward Jesus. Let him lovingly reveal yourself to you. Resolve to make a sincere Confession in the coming weeks. Follow him into that desert, confident that he is full of love and mercy. ■

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

### *In the wilderness*

- Have you had any positive or negative experiences of solitude?
- Sr Anastasia describes Lent as being a time to turn back to God, receive grace, to love others and to be our best selves. How can we grow to be the best self Christ wants us to be?
- The Sacrament of Confession has always been a significant part of the Lenten journey. Sr Anastasia says that Confession is a chance to “reveal our unmasked self to someone who will not reject us”. How does the Sacrament of Confession help us to grow as followers of Christ?

## PERSONAL REFLECTION FOR THE WEEK AHEAD

- Consider planning for your Lenten journey this year. What disciplines will you put in place? What time will you schedule to make sure it doesn't get forgotten?
- Do you have a friend, partner or spouse who you can walk with through Lent—keeping each other accountable to your Lenten commitments?
- Take time to sit in silence, at home or some place suitable, and draw your mind to the person of Jesus. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you.

## CLOSING PRAYER AND INTERCESSIONS

**Host:** Eternal Father,  
your Son has promised that you would grant all the graces we ask of you in his name. Trusting in this promise, and in the name of Jesus Christ, we ask of you the following graces:

We ask for *wisdom* to know ourselves more deeply, follow you more closely and love you more truly.

**All:** Lord, grace us with your wisdom.

**Host:** We ask for your divine *light*, which will enable us to see the vanity of all the things of this earth, and see also your infinite greatness and goodness.

**All:** Lord, grace us with your light.

**Host:** We ask for a share in your *love*, so that we can detach ourselves from all creatures, especially ourselves, and love only your holy will.

**All:** Lord, grace us with your love.

**Host:** Grant us the grace to have *confidence in the merits* of Jesus Christ and in the intercession of his most holy mother, Mary.

**All:** Lord, grace us with confidence in your merits.

**Host:** We ask for the grace of *perseverance*, knowing that whenever we call on you for assistance, you will answer our calls and come to our aid.

**All:** Lord, grace us with perseverance.

**Host:** Finally, grant us the grace to pray always, O Eternal Father, in the name of Jesus.

**All:** Amen.

*Adapted from the “Prayer for Fives Graces” by St Alphonsus Liguori (1696–1787).*

## 26 FEBRUARY 2020

Ash Wednesday

JOEL 2:12–18  
PSALM 50(51):3–6, 12–14, 17  
2 CORINTHIANS 5:20–6:2  
MATTHEW 6:1–6, 16–18

**[Do not] neglect the grace of God  
that you have received.** 2 CO 6:1

Some of you who have seen the film, *The Mission*, will remember that wonderful part where one of the main characters, Mendoza, climbed the mountain with Fr Gabriel in order to take on a new life. He carried a huge and heavy load up the slippery slopes of the mountain as his self-imposed penance for his slaying of his own brother. He refused all offers of help and all pleadings to let go of his load. He lost his grip, slid away, and started again. Then, as he got close to the top and stumbled once more, a native came out of the bush, took a knife, and cut the load from him. It tumbled down into the raging river below and Mendoza cried from relief, and who knows what else.

My memory says the native hugged him. This, for me, captures the season of Lent as we commence it today on Ash Wednesday. Grace isn't some ethereal, wispy notion that wafts across our lives bringing momentary relief. Grace is a person—Our Lord Jesus Christ. Grace helps us to see where we have got lost, and once acknowledged by us, grace takes the knife and cuts the load from us. We have carried it long enough and it is time to accept his help and allow him to actually redeem us.

Whatever you are carrying, pay attention to it today and then stand back and accept every offer of help, consolation, forgiveness and healing. Furthermore, be open to the grace that will make you a source of grace for someone else. Then, you will truly know redemption.

*Loving God, I put my life in your hands. I place in your hands the past with its mistakes and successes. I place the future with its uncertainty. I place the present—this day, this minute—with the assurance that you are here and you are my God. Amen.*

MOTHER HILDA SCOTT OSB

## 25 MARCH 2020

The Annunciation of the Lord

ISAIAH 7:10–14, 8:10  
PSALM 39(40):7–11  
HEBREWS 10:4–10  
LUKE 1:26–38

**Rejoice, so highly favoured!  
The Lord is with you.** LK 1:28

When the angel Gabriel said to Mary, “Rejoice, so highly favoured! The Lord is with you,” her initial response was not one of comfort and consolation. On the contrary, St Luke tells us that Mary was “deeply disturbed by these words and asked herself what this greeting could mean.” How good it is for St Luke to share these details with us, for Christian discipleship is not primarily about comfort, and it is very often initiated by a great disturbance—an interruption in our lives.

The Catholic American fiction writer, Flannery O'Connor, was born on this day, 25 March 1925, on the feast of the Annunciation. O'Connor is known for making *incarnational art* and for having a profoundly *sacramental imagination*, as all of her stories display a critical instance of God's interruption. She writes, “There is a moment in every great story in which the presence of grace can be felt as it waits to be accepted or rejected, even though the reader may not recognise this moment.”

Our lives are all great stories, whether we recognise it or not. And, God is constantly working to break into them, in order to save us, in order to pour out his grace and mercy upon us, through Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit, in order to bring his love to the world.

Mary shows us how to respond to God's interruptions in our lives. Even though she was initially disturbed by Gabriel's greeting, she knew that God loved her, that he wanted what was best for her, and that he could be trusted, which is why she gave him her fiat. May our hearts be conformed to the heart of Mary, and may we, too, give him our fiat.

*Mary, Model of Disciples, Pray for us. Amen.*

FR DAMIAN FERENCE