

## Living Lent with Pope Francis

- First Sunday of Lent  
- March 9, 2014  
- Stephen V. Sundborg, S.J.

In the gospel today as we begin Lent, we find Jesus who has gone out into the desert in order to be able to hear the word of God before he begins his ministry. He says, “One does not live by bread alone, but on every word that comes forth from the mouth of God.” That’s what he has been feeding on for forty days. We too are invited to begin our Lent there. That too is where the whole of the incredible ministry of Pope Francis began, hearing the word of God, who showed compassion on him and chose him.

This Thursday will mark the first anniversary of the election of Pope Francis. He has caught the attention of all of us, not just of Catholics, but of the whole world. Hands down he was TIME magazine’s “Person of the Year”. People come up to me all the time on the street and say, “Hey, Father, I’m not a Catholic, but boy do I like that Pope of yours!” I am sure he has caught your attention, inspired you, as the “Person of Your Year” too. What I would like to talk about with you today on this first Sunday of Lent, is what would it mean to live Lent with Pope Francis.

Let’s start with the experience of hearing the word of God that turned Pope Francis’ life around and let’s see what that might suggest for us this Lent. When he was seventeen years old he loved to dance and he liked girls. He was on his way to the train station on a September 21<sup>st</sup> to meet his friends to go to a Students Day party. His sister even says he was going to propose to his

girlfriend at that party. But something happened on the way to the train station. He stopped in a church to say a prayer and he met there a priest, Fr. Duarte, and so impressed by his spirituality, decided to go to confession to him. Here is what he says happened:

**“Something strange happened to me in that confession. I don’t know what it was, but it changed my life. I think it surprised me, caught me with my guard down. It was the surprise, the astonishment of a chance encounter. I realized that they were waiting for me. That is the religious experience: the astonishment of meeting someone who has been waiting for you all along. From that moment on, for me, God is the One who ‘springs it on you’. You search for Him, but He searches for you first. You want to find Him, but He finds you first. ... (God was having compassion on me and was choosing me.)... That was how I felt God saw me in that conversation. And that is the way He wants me always to look upon others: with much compassion and as if I were choosing them for Him; not excluding anyone, because everyone is chosen by the love of God...”**

The seventeen-year-old did not make it to the train station. His life from then on was on a different track. This experience is the source at age seventeen of hearing the word of God of the person we know as Pope Francis in his seventies. It led to a Pope of compassion and joy, reaching out to wash the feet of the poor and of prisoners, embracing the deformed, rushing to meet and to kiss refugees, joyfully loving persons of other religions or none, walking as a humble pilgrim with all and listening to them, not judging but showing compassion, God’s compassion to all, trying to live like Jesus of

**Nazareth, living simply, dressing simply, praying daily for hours before this God who always looks for and waits for him and springs it on him, springs compassion and joy on him, and calls him to show God's own compassion and joy to all.**

**What might living Lent with Pope Francis mean? First of all it might mean in this Lent giving God a new chance in our lives through giving time to prayer and silence, stopping in a church, even going to confession, letting ourselves be surprised or astonished by what God who waits for us springs on us.**

**Second it might mean taking a good look at how we show compassion, to whom we reach out, whom we embrace and include. Perhaps it means taking a look at whether we judge people in our own families, in our own university, in our businesses and neighborhoods, and see who we exclude from our attention and care.**

**Then it might ask us whether out of love for the poor we can live a bit more simply, dress more simply, simplify the clutter of our lives, however they are cluttered. Can we, out of love for the poor, spend less on what we really don't need but which they really do need?**

**Most importantly, might a Lent lived with Pope Francis be like the time in the desert, a forty-day period with Jesus of Nazareth, reading the gospels anew, learning something about him we don't already know, seeking to "follow him more nearly and to love him more dearly"? When Pope Francis writes about what we are told of Jesus, he calls it "The Joy of the Gospel". Knowing Jesus is not a sad or heavy thing, it is a joyful thing. Lent with Pope Francis in his**

**following and modelling his life on Jesus of Nazareth can be a very joyful time. I think Pope Francis would say to us, “Be surprised by the Jesus of Nazareth who waits for you; let him spring it on you, spring the joy of following Him on you. Let Lent be more the time of Him finding you than of you searching for him.”**

After seeing how hearing the word of God set the whole life of Pope Francis in a new direction and suggesting what living Lent with him might be like, let me end with my favorite story about Pope Francis. During the night after he was elected a year ago, he could not sleep through whole of the night. Imagine that! He got up in order to ask if he could be taken on a drive around Rome. When he came out of his simple apartment, he found a Swiss Guard standing with spear and helmet next to the door, guarding the Pope's room. The Pope went back into his room and brought out a chair and told the Swiss Guard to sit down. The guard said, "I can't do that. I must stand and am not allowed to sit." The Pope asked him, "Who told you that?" "The Captain of the Swiss Guards", replied the man. "Well", said Francis, "I'm the Pope and I'm telling you to sit down!" The guard did. The Pope disappeared into his room again and came out in a moment with a large slab of bread spread thickly with jam and gave it to the guard so he would have something to eat sitting there while the Pope played hooky, driving around Rome in the middle of the night.

Maybe this story of the humble humanity and humor of the Pope is a gospel of joy for us this Lent, a story for today of how Jesus would act. Maybe it shows the kind of simple acts of compassion which flow from hearing the word of God anew, as we are invited to do as we follow Jesus in these coming weeks of

**Lent together with Pope Francis, living “on every word that comes forth from the mouth of God”.**