

## Discussions offer Lenten challenge

By Father Joseph A. Hart  
Guest contributor

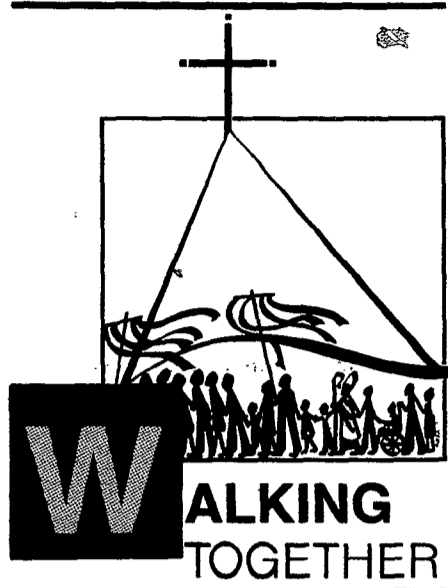
Lent is quite different these days compared to the rigorous 40-day period it was when I was growing up. During this earlier era, adult Catholics throughout the world reduced their eating schedule to only one full meal a day throughout the Lenten time.

All this changed on Dec. 4, 1963, when the bishops at the Second Vatican Council decreed in the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* that "the practice of penance should be encouraged in ways suited to the present day, to different regions, and to individual circumstances." (#110)

In one sense the change was long overdue. The Universal Church was imposing the same type of fast and abstinence on both the prosperous Europeans and Americans and the Earth's famine-ridden populations. It was asking desert peoples, who had never seen fish, to eat fish. It was asking the poor, who seldom tasted meat, to abstain from meat.

Moreover, Lenten penance had come to mean individual penance done in expiation for personal sins alone. It focused everything on the individual person and his or her relationship with God. In no way did it attempt to address the root causes of sin or what the council called "the social consequences of sin."

Following the council's admonition that "penance should not only be



internal and individual but also external and social," Pope Paul VI in his *Apostolic Constitution on Christian Penance* suggested that "other ways of penance should be sealed by the authority of Church prescription ... substituting the practice of prayer and the works of charity for the observance of fast and abstinence."

All this seemed so reasonable and so right in 1966. In hindsight, however, it is clear that it did not work out as the pope and the council envisioned. Without a common penance imposed on a particular region, the penance became even more private and personal. Without clear guidelines as to what was expected of each person in Lent, some Catholics adopted the lightest

and most frivolous penances possible. Many more excused themselves from penance altogether.

What the pope and the council had in mind was a renewal of penance through the rediscovery of its meaning and use in the ancient church. Then penance was considered a medicine which — when properly prescribed — immediately began to heal the causes of sin.

Then penance was never undertaken alone: the ministers and the faithful together did penance, praying and supporting each other in the process. It was always a communal project because the community recognized the communal harm done by sin.

As a diocese we are about to begin our second round of parish or community synod discussions. These sessions were deliberately scheduled for the first, second and third weeks of Lent precisely to serve as this year's Lenten project for our local church. In some ways they are meant to recapture some sense of the communal penance of the ancient church while still fulfilling Vatican II's requirements.

They are truly penitential because:

They call for personal sacrifice. No matter how good these discussion sessions may be, to give up precious time, to rearrange one's schedule, to put aside relaxation, to juggle work and family duties requires considerable sacrifice.

They call us to prayer. At both the

beginning and the end of the synod session the community is gathered in prayer in order to place the matters under discussion and the future of the local church totally in God's hands. In addition, each small group is asked to pause in prayer before making any recommendations so that in our planning we are open to the prompting of the Holy Spirit.

They are truly charity. Our discussions and recommendations are a gift of love to those who are in need — whether adults seeking release from poverty or youths seeking direction in their lives. Our whole synod process is aimed at attacking the problems of our time at their roots. In recommending what we as church can do, we involve ourselves in their solution, we offer ourselves as a gift to those in need.

Of course, the spring synod discussions cannot be the complete extent of our Lenten penance. We must still undertake that penance which will help to release us from our bondage to personal sin.

However, if we as a local church freely undertake the synod discussions as a means by which our parishes and communities can grow closer together, our families can be enriched and our world moved in greater conformity to God's reign, then our Lenten journey will have been truly fruitful.

Father Hart is director of the diocesan Synod.

## Avoid the devil's 'sales pitch' of temptation

By Father Albert Shamon  
Courier columnist

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Matthew 4:1-11; (R1) Genesis 2:7-9; 3:1-7; (R2) Romans 5:12-19.

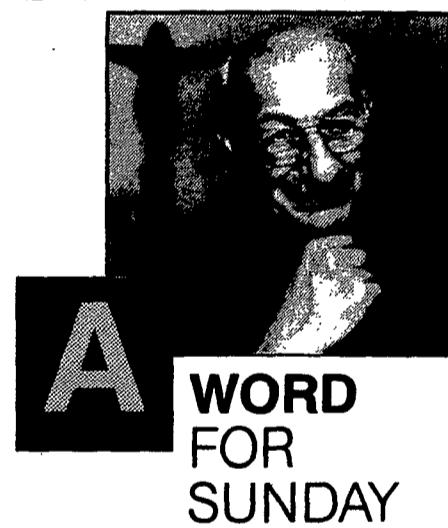
The first reading and the Gospel both deal with the same subject: temptation. In the second reading, St. Paul describes the effects on us of the responses made to temptation by the first Adam in the garden and the second Adam in the desert.

Because the first Adam succumbed to temptation, we too are now vulnerable to temptation. The second Adam did not succumb, meaning that we all can conquer temptation.

Life consists of choices, just as a game of checkers is made up of moves. Just as the moves we make in checkers determine whether we win the game, so the choices we make in life determine whether we shall win eternal life.

Good choices ensure a good life; bad choices guarantee a bad life.

Good choices are not easy to make because of the devil's intrusions and intrigues. He is just as present to us as he was in the garden and in the desert.



We tend to forget this. As a result we leave ourselves wide open, for we think we can cope with temptations by relying on our own resources. Without the supernatural aids of prayer, the sacraments and the church, we will fail miserably for we are no match for the fallen angels.

Our Lady in her reported messages at Medjugorje reminds us again and again of the devil's malignant pres-

ence today. She does this so that we shall have constant recourse to supernatural weaponry, that we put on the armor of God.

The devil spawned the two greatest revolutions in modern times: the French Revolution of 1789 and the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. This is the judgment, not of theologians, but of historians.

He is still among us today — ever active. His activity is to get us to make bad choices. So he tempts us. Temptation is the devil's sales pitch, telling us how wonderful it will be to do something God has forbidden us to do.

For instance, during Lent, God wants us to go to Mass more frequently, make the Stations of the Cross on Fridays, pray the daily rosary, go to confession.

Here's what the devil says: "Daily Mass? You don't want to be a holy Joe or Jane. You go on Sundays, that's enough. After all, you are entitled to your much-needed sleep."

"As for the Stations of the Cross — good heavens, there are enough crosses in life without having to meditate on His. Watch out it could depress you. Go to a good movie instead. You

owe it to yourself to relax.

"The daily rosary? Now that's a boring exercise: reciting Hail Mary after Hail Mary, like a kid repeating his ABCs. Don't believe everything that is said about the power of the rosary. That's Mary's sales pitch."

"As for confession, you'd think you were a big sinner. You don't hurt anybody. No big deal if you've had an abortion or practiced artificial contraception or masturbate or play around. After all sex is supposed to be fun. Everybody's doing it, so no big deal. Go to confession? You don't have to, sin is between you and God. Just tell Him and go to Communion."

Temptation is not just saying, "Take your choice;" temptation uses a sales pitch as in the garden and in the desert. Jesus successfully resisted the devil's temptation because He fasted, prayed and used the Scriptures.

During Lent, why not fast on Wednesdays and Fridays? Why not pray the rosary daily as a family? Why not read at least one line of Scripture each day. Why not go to confession?

You will have 10,000 reasons not to. Watch out — that's temptation plain and simple.

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