

- The great Cistercian abbot, St. Bernard of Clairvaux, once wrote that, “The capacity of any one’s soul is judged by the amount of love one possesses” (SBoC: *Song of Songs*, 27:10).
- His point was that, even though our souls are not material in nature, they have a spiritual capacity to expand or contract, and the more one practices the virtues – especially charity – the more the soul expands.
- And as the soul expands, the soul becomes a more spacious dwelling place for God, and consequently it takes on a greater likeness to God.
- As Christians who have received the presence of our Trinitarian Lord within our souls through baptism, it is both a duty and a privilege to make sufficient room within our souls so that our Lord can be comfortable and not cramped!
- This past week with the celebration of Ash Wednesday, we moved into the holy season of Lent, which is the time of the year that Holy Mother Church especially encourages us to do all that we can to expand our souls.
- On this first Sunday of Lent, we are given a little primer on how the process of soul-expansion begins! In our Gospel today we are given the curious story of Jesus going out into the desert immediately after His baptism in the Jordan River.
- In a biblical sense, the desert can be understood as a place of solitude. It’s a place to retreat from the world so that one may be purified by prayer and fasting.
- We see this in the story of Moses, of how he was alone for 40 days in the desert before proclaiming the Law on Mt. Sinai (cf. Ex 34:28). We see it, too, with the prophet Elijah, who journeyed for 40 days through the desert as well (cf. I Kings 19:5-8).
- And now, before proclaiming the Good News of the Gospel publicly and beginning His ministry of preaching, teaching, and healing, Jesus spends 40 days in the desert to prepare Himself by fasting and prayer.
- So, just as Christ prepared for His public ministry by 40 days of prayer and fasting, we are to prepare ourselves for a life of holiness during these 40 days of Lent.
- Truly, in Lent we are called to follow our Lord out of the world and into the desert so that we too might fast and pray in earnest. We are called to separate ourselves from worldly concerns and attachments as much as possible.
- If we are to be like Christ, if we are to be holy and shine forth as His presence in our dark and fallen world, then we must be purified by prayer and fasting.
- For these practices of prayer and fasting that, along with alms giving, we embrace during Lent, are absolutely essential to growth in holiness and expanding our souls.
- And it is the expansive soul that shines the light of Christ most brightly out into the world!
- But note well that our Lord’s time in the desert wasn’t a cozy retreat. Quite the opposite! It was a period of intense spiritual warfare in which He was sorely tried by the devil.
- And this is because the evil one understands the importance of prayer and fasting and how conducive they are to expanding one’s soul!
- Thus, he’s been busy tempting people to sin from the beginning of human history, as we see in our first reading from Genesis in which Adam and Eve are tempted by the serpent to effects disastrous for us all.

- But temptations to sin, even those that come directly from the devil, should not *overly* frighten us. For truly, going through this type of experience is part of the process of growing in holiness! Remember: we must be tried in order to be made true!
- So part of being a good soldier for Christ is recognizing that the temptations to sin that form the fabric of our everyday lives, especially those that come from the devil, give us a chance to take a step forward in holiness and deliver a defeat to the great enemy of our souls.
- But we must be willing to fight!
- The beautiful thing about today's Gospel story is that in allowing Himself to be tempted, Jesus shows us how to overcome the temptations we suffer so that we can be victorious.
- We can imagine how weak Jesus must have felt after praying and fasting for 40 days and nights, but despite the physical weakness He may have felt, there is an interior fortitude that is developed through fasting and prayer.
- By the practice of denying oneself through fasting those things that we enjoy, we learn to master our wills so that we have the courage to turn away from sin – no matter how enticing it might be.
- And by focusing our attention on God through prayer, we learn to submit ourselves to our Lord's humble yoke, and we develop the good habit of trusting in His grace – knowing that it is only by God's grace that we will ever conquer sin and grow in holiness.
- In prayer we come to know God, we come to trust God, and we receive the grace to give ourselves to Him, just as a bride gives herself whole-heartedly to her bridegroom.
- Jesus shows us that, by preparing ourselves through prayer and fasting, God gives us the fortitude to stare down the devil, and see through and counter his lies and half-truths.
- Jesus shows us that, if we humble ourselves before God through these important spiritual practices of prayer and fasting, God gives us the grace to overcome the evil in our lives.
- So, my brothers and sisters, if we want to have those expansive souls in which our Lord rests easily and comfortably, we must begin to grow in holiness by practicing prayer and fasting with determination. Through the intercession of St. Bernard, may we each do these two things well!