

(Play 30 second Snippet from Violin Concerto (MP3))

Nicolo Paganini's Violin Concerto No. 1 In D Major is one of the most demanding of violin pieces ever written. Interestingly it is most commonly performed by talented but young virtuosos rather than more mature masters of the instrument.

The reason for this is that the piece is so demanding that only those who are in the habit of practicing for 6-8 hours a day can handle the intricacies of so complex a composition.

The career demands and adult responsibilities of a professional violinist don't usually allow for that much practice time.

I'm sure that we can all relate to that in some sense. Maybe it was an instrument or a sport that has fallen into neglect or worse, simply forgotten all together.

No matter the circumstance, we can all acknowledge that "Practice makes perfect" but we can also admit that we don't always take the time to practice.

And while we may not be as good at playing the trombone or playing basketball as we used to be, it is understandable that such things will decline. After all, we are busy. Work, school, familythey all demand our time. We can understand and accept these losses.

However, it is often a worse case in our spiritual lives. Time for prayer and meditation, the reading of Scripture, is, many times put on the "back burner" for whenever we can fit it in.

There is a proverb that says: "Good habits result from resisting temptation." On Ash Wednesday we heard three fundamental orientations for this season in the rich Scripture readings: almsgiving, prayer and fasting.

Today's Gospel shows us the importance of practice in these virtues if we are to come to perfection in the spiritual life.

We read that the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness. Satan uses this time of weakness, of very real human hunger and duress to tempt Jesus.

Jesus is ready and able to respond to these temptations, in His full humanity, precisely because He was focused on doing God's will, by an understanding and acceptance of His mission and His desire to accomplish that mission. The mission was to suffer death for our salvation. He was strengthened in His spiritual fortitude by His time in the wilderness, even as His body suffered.

As Christians, we are in a constant fight with the desires born of our sinful natures. We are unable to resist temptation without God's grace. We are called to trust the Lord (not ourselves) for strength to resist temptation before it becomes sin. It is not the temptation itself

that leads us to sin, but our lack of resistance and trust in the Lord for deliverance.

In the first temptation, Jesus responds to the Devil, not by denying the human need for food, but by putting the human life and journey in perspective. The God who fed Israel in the desert for forty years with the miraculous manna would not perform the same miracle for himself. Jesus stands in solidarity with all of our hungers, food, wealth, power, love and He demonstrates that dependence on God can fill these needs.

In our Lenten practice of fasting and abstinence, we help to perfect our own dependence on God for our needs.

In the second temptation, Satan offers something he claims to own, but cannot give.... all the kingdoms of the world. This second temptation is our own, each time we reason with ourselves that if we give in to our favorite sin, we will feel better, we'll get it out of our system, and we'll be able to overcome it the next time. We all know how that works out, don't we? We do it, we don't feel better and we are weakened in resolve for the next temptation in the same sin. It is a sin of power and glory we are unable to give ourselves.

Our Lenten discipline of prayer is the weapon of choice in this battle. For instance, when we are tempted in the sins of impurity, a decade of the rosary, meditating on the purity of our Virgin Mother and seeking her help may be enough to strengthen us.

The third temptation is one of pride.

How full we can be of ourselves sometimes, expecting God to do our bidding, being upset with Him when we don't get our wishes granted by His divine intervention. We ask to have our crosses removed, even as Christ embraces His own.

Our "cross-training" this Lent is in the giving of alms, for in helping those unable to help themselves, we lighten their burdens and place our own burdens in perspective.

However, far from creating a great divide between Jesus Christ and ourselves, our own trials and weaknesses can become the privileged place of our encounter with Him.

Jesus has been tested in all respects like us -- he knows all of our difficulties; he is a tried man; he knows our condition from the inside and from the outside -- this is how He acquired a profound capacity for compassion, for one must suffer in order to truly feel for others. From Jesus we learn that God is present and sustaining us in the midst of test, temptation and yes, even sinfulness.

We are called upon, at all times, but most especially in this Lenten season, these forty days that we are led by the Spirit, into the wilderness, where we pick up again or increase our practices in spirituality.

We began this homily with a performance by a young musical virtuoso, a person of great talent, with skills that were honed and maintained by rigorous practice of his instrument.

We are called, by our Baptism, to be "virtuosos of virtue" but we can only become one by practicing virtue. Lent is an opportune time to commit or re-commit to this.

I will leave you with this quote from St. Josemaria Escriva, the founder of Opus Dei:

"I have decided not to let this Lent go by like rain on stones, leaving no trace. I will let it soak into me, changing me. I will be converted, I will turn again to the Lord and love him as he wants to be loved."