

Fr. Larry Richards

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Good Morning! I had a vacation, they said. Every day they filled in! You know, I was supposed to do a Mission, well they gave me a talk every day or a Mass every day or healing service every day, so, I didn't have much of a vacation. But it was – it got to 60, so it was pretty nice. So, anyway, while I was out there, in California and then Louisiana, for both I did Men's Conferences and at the first Men's Conference, there was I guy named Tim Staples, you might have heard him – he is with Catholic Answers. He was in the seminary for the Baptists, converted, became a Catholic and was in the Marines before all of this. And then, eventually he went and got married. But he still goes around and does a lot of Apologetics. And here, as soon as he started, I thought "this is a man after my own heart!" Because, he sat there and he talked about "you know if Jesus Christ was present in our world today, he would not be welcome in our churches – he would be thrown out of seminary! He would be one of those people that we would not be comfortable with." You know, and then he gives examples, and what he says is that we have bought into a "Cultural Jesus." You know, its part of our culture. Jesus – we have this nice little cultural thing – we put Him in our little box and we pull Him out during Lent and Easter, or whatever. And He is just this man and we keep Him nice. You know, but then he says "you know, this Jesus is the same Jesus – could you imagine if He walked into our church" he says "and He makes a whip out of something, and then He starts pushing the pews over, and then He starts throwing people out of the church..." we'd sit there and say "oh, Jesus, you need to do some anger management, you know!" "Jesus, you need to sit there and be gentle, Jesus, how about this nice book on the Art of Kindness? Come on Jesus." Or, when He sits there takes the woman and she says "would you heal my daughter?" And He calls her a dog! "You know, we are not to go and give the scraps to dogs!" But then, she keeps going. Jesus was a man who was not –well, accepted in a lot of places! He said things that made people uneasy. And so, if you listen to the first reading today, it talks about going beyond that and about what this Lent is – Lent begins on Wednesday, and what you and I are called to do is to put away our cultural Jesus. And we do that – like again, when I was out there, a kid that came to conversion a couple of years ago after one of my Parish Missions and listened to a lot of my tapes – he is 19 and he says "Father, could we talk?" And so, one morning we went walking and as we were walking he says "Father, can you tell me what to do for Lent?" And I said "no...I'm not going to tell you what to do for Lent, but I can tell you what NOT to do -whatever you have just done in the past because of culture." Now, Lent is coming on Wednesday, and if you listen to this first reading, this is God preparing us for Lent. It says "thus says the Lord, I will her into the desert..." which is Lent "and speak to her heart. She shall respond there as in the days of her youth when she came up from the land of Egypt. I will espouse..." what does it mean to espouse? To marry! "I will marry you to me forever! I will espouse you in light and justice in love and mercy. I will espouse you in fidelity, then you shall know the Lord." Lent is that you and I come to know Jesus better, so that we can come to know Him, so, listen to your pastor. Anything you have done before in Lent – if I'm going to say "what are you going to do for Lent?" "Well, I always..." Stop it! You are not allowed to do it this Lent, unless Christ tells you

to do it. "I always, Father...this is what I do..." That means that you are a cultural catholic. That means you go through the motions... "I do the same thing every year." The Pharisees did the same thing every year and they still went to hell....we think. They did their same thing every year because this is what we do! God does not invite you to be a cultural follower of Him. "I do this because every year I give up chocolate." OOOOOH!!! "Every year I give up Pepsi! Every year I give up television." Well, stop it! You don't do anything this year until you go on your face before the God of the Universe and say "Jesus, Lent is about you, about getting to know you. What do you want me to do, that I will get to know you better?" "You want me to give up chocolate Jesus? I'll give it up!" And if that is what He tells you, go for it! But don't you do it because this is what you've always done, because you are a pagan, cultural catholic if you do it! That is no way to enter into Lent! Lent this year will mean nothing to you – you will be the same as you have always been. "Oh, I can't wait until Easter so that I can start eating my chocolate again." It's all about that – you can't do that! You have to ask Jesus! You have to fall on your face! "What do you want me to do so that I can know you Jesus?" And let me give you a hint of what it's going to be. It's going to involve your time - giving Him more time in your life. It might involve spending time with Him in front of the Blessed Sacrament – extra time. It might involve you reading the scriptures. It might involve you praying the rosary and really meditating on it instead of just saying it. It might involve you joining one of those Disciples in Mission groups. It might involve you in anything – I don't know what it will be! I'm not going to tell you what to do! But I am going to tell you what not to do. Anything that is just a cultural thing that you are just going to go through the motions on is not what Jesus wants of you. "I will espouse you to me forever. I will lead you into the desert. I will speak to you this Lent that you may come to know me." What does He want for these next forty days – that at the end of the forty days, you will come to know Him better. And please, don't any of us here think you know Him enough...I've spent an hour with Him every day since I was 17 and I still haven't a clue. I still have to sit there – how much he wants me to know Him deeper this Lent. So the challenge today is to put everything else aside that you have ever done – to get out of the "cultural catholic," to get out of putting Jesus in your little pocket and making Him what you always do, and don't you do anything until you look at Jesus and say "you tell me what to do...so that I can know you and so that I can enter into the desert with you Jesus – that is what I will do this Lent." So you have three days – Monday, Tuesday, - 2 ½ days for you to pray and to think and to spend time and to say "what do you want me to do Jesus?" And then when you decide to do that, ask yourself a question – "how will this help me to know Jesus more?" And if it won't – don't do it! Ok? Ya got it? Get it? Gonna do it? You better! May each of you know His love today and forever. Amen.