

February 25, 2007
First Sunday in Lent
Fr. Larry Richards

Good Morning! Yesterday, if you were watching EWTN, I was on, concelebrating Mass. And you know, that is probably the only time you will see me on EWTN. But, I stayed down there last evening with the Brothers and everything. But, as I was flying down to Birmingham for the Men's Conference I flew from here to Memphis, and then in Memphis, we changed planes and went from Memphis to Birmingham. And I'm already on the plane and I am sitting there in Seat Number 2-D against the window, which I always like. And the plane is full and this young guy about 25 years old comes walking in and he asks the Stewardess "where am I sitting?" And she says "what's your number? 2C?" And he says "next to the priest?" And she says "Yep!" And he says "oh, this will be good!" And so I'm ecstatic now! It's like "you don't know who your sitting next to!" And so, the guy came and sat next to me and I said "Hi, Son! Who are you?" "I'm Frank." "I'm Father Larry, nice to meet you." And then he decided to start asking questions. And then, oh about 10 minutes into the flight he says "I'm an Atheist." And I said "ohhhhhhhhh, won't this be interesting?" So I said, "well, let's talk son." And so, great talk. As a matter of fact, by the time he left he said "well maybe I'm an agnostic." I said "yea, maybe." But he sat there and he has a wife that is from Brazil, and she has been praying for him. And he was supposed to be on a flight the night before, and his flight got cancelled, and he missed another plane and he happens to get on my plane and sits next to me! He says "I guess someone had this planned!" I said "I guess so!" But in the midst of it – when I talked to him about why he didn't believe – and do you know the #1 reason he didn't believe? Because of us – Christians. Because he says, like for instance – he grew up in Boston, and was baptized as a child and then all of his friends are getting married and not one of them – they all say they are Christians and think they have a "get out of hell free card." You know, they go have sex with their girlfriends, they go get drunk – they do the most miserable things, and then they sit there and think "well right before I die, I'm going to say I am sorry and go right to heaven." And then he says "what kind of people are they – what kind are they? And then the Muslims killing everybody – I don't buy it Father! If I would meet one person that would live it – maybe I would buy it!" And I said "thank you – sit here!" And so, as we sat there and we talked about this whole reality and I said "listen, my job is to help people and I am a challenger, son! I don't know if you have met many priests that are challengers, but I never leave people where they are – including you. God has a plan for your life and if you are seeking truth, God is going to do it! But you can't just look at the people around you – because most people who call themselves Catholics or Christians or whatever are lukewarm people. They go to church for "fire insurance" just in case God does exist, so they don't go to hell but they live their life most of the time their way...", including me, sometimes, huh? And so, I said we are all human beings, but God is calling us to be more than this. And he said "well if people started living that Father, then I might believe it more." I said "you watch what is going to happen. First of all, son, I am going to be praying for you and I am going to have my parish praying for you, so you don't have a prayer! You are going to become a Christian before you know it." But, it was a strong thing, because this is where temptation comes! Don't you see? That was even how the devil tried to get Jesus

Christ. "Take care of yourself first! Jesus, you are hungry! Take this – you can do a miracle - you're Jesus! Take that stone and make it bread. Of course God wants you to take care of yourself first. Have some bread – eat your fill! Be satisfied because you have to take care of yourself first and your needs!" And Jesus said "it's not about just taking care of ourselves first – no it's not! Get out of here!" Then what does the devil do? He puts him up on a high path port, or whatever it is and says "this is all mine..." which is a lie "but all of this is mine! You can have power! You can have influence over other people..." yea, the God of the Universe – He needs that, huh? But he sits there and says "you can have influence..." but that is where it is for us too! The temptation – the power! Think of the influence – think of the good you can do if you are in charge! "You should serve no one but God alone." But anyway, what it comes down to is that the devil was trying to get Jesus to put himself first! "Put yourself first! Don't worry, God will take care of you if you put yourself first, and then God is just going to serve you." And then Jesus turns it all upside down and says "listen, what it all comes down to is you shall serve God first..." And that is what Lent is about. Lent is about God hitting us and saying "listen, you have been serving yourself all of the time – you are always even serving me sometimes for you – what you can get out of serving me, instead of what does it mean just to serve me." It doesn't mean putting yourself first. It doesn't mean getting power for influence it doesn't mean looking for miracles so that you can say "look at all of the things God blesses me with..." It is about serving God first. And ultimately, that is always the challenge, huh? You know, and it is in my own life so much when I sit there and think about Lent and different things. You know, ultimately – like if you went to Mass on Ash Wednesday, the first reading was so strong, where God said "this is what I want. Return to me with your whole heart. Let yourself go. Return to me. If you serve me first and above all, then I will take care of you." And so again, with this guy I said "look at the people who have lived for themselves throughout the world. The people that take care of themselves first – when they die, everybody forgets them." I said "look at the people who have their one life and give it away." And of course, I used John Paul II. If there was anyone who could have sat there and complained, it could have been John Paul. He loses his mother when he was a little boy; he loses his brother when he was a teenager; and he find his father dead – his last living relative – when he came home from work at 20 years old. If anyone had a right to complain and say "God stinks and God doesn't take care of me and when is he going to put me first..." it would have been John Paul II. He watched one of his best friends in the seminary gunned down right in front of him. He could have sat there and said "the heck with this following of God! Why should I serve this God when everything has been taken from me?" But John Paul II, instead of focusing on "my pain, my needs that God isn't taking care of..." he took his one life and he laid it down in front of the God of the Universe and he says "use me – I choose to serve you." And what did God do with that one man? He changed the world. So you and I can come this Lent and say "ok God, what are you going to do for me? Its' about my needs and my wants and my desires, are you going to take care of me?" Or, "Lord, here is another Lent. I am here for you – to serve you - to put your wants and your desires before mine. And Lord, it is not about me – it is about you." And if you and I find that – even as we enter into this Lent – and you know, I do it too. Then, the second reading gives us the out of this – what does it say?

“Everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.” So when you and I come and say “ok God, I’m calling upon you and I’m calling upon your name – Lord it is about you.” And when I call upon the name of the Lord, what I have to do is forget about me! “Lord, I call on your name to save me! Not me, not my wants, not my desires, not what I am going to do for you this Lent – but Lord I call upon you.” And boy, when you and I call upon Him – when we sit there and focus on Him and not focus on ourselves, then not only will this Lent be a great Lent, but our life will be a great life. You think He did great things with John Paul? You think He did great things with Mother Theresa? Don’t you get it? He wants to do great things with you – and with me. I told that kid again yesterday – remember Fr. Larry Richards and watch the next 20 years what’s going to happen. The Church is going to change, because we are going to sit there and stop living for ourselves, and if I have to go to the highest mountain, and if I have to do a thousand more tapes – we are going to keep pushing it. Nothing is about us – it is about Christ! And Lent reminds us that we are not here to “gimmee, gimmee, gimmee...” we are here to serve. And when I come to serve, and I call upon the name of the Lord, the world is going to change, because one heart or 500 hearts seeking His will above our own, the Lord can do great things. I hope you believe it and I hope you live it. Today at this Mass, we have the Rite of Sending. So, we have a bunch of people who are going to come and join our community – join the Catholic community and join the community of St. Joseph-Bread of Life. And what they do when they say that is they say “listen Lord, I have been living it my way for a long time. Now Jesus Christ, I want to live it your way. Now Jesus Christ, I call upon your name so that I may be saved.” So as these younger men, and older men and women come and surrender their life to Jesus Christ today, and they begin the process even deeper and stronger, lets pray for them, and may their example give us an example, so that no one can ever say “I don’t believe in God because of ...” and put your name or my name there. Because the only thing they live for is themselves. May it never be said of any of us. May people look at us and say “I believe in God because of this person, who lives their life so unselfishly.” May each of you know His live today and forever. Amen.