My Brothers and Sisters,

The readings for the Third Sunday of Lent challenge our faith and our self-understanding.

In First Corinthians, St. Paul wrote that Christ crucified is a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles. Today most Christians, at least at times, struggle to believe. Among other reasons, like the Jews of Jesus' time, most of us would love to have dramatic signs of Jesus' presence, power, and activity in our lives and world. Like the Gentiles of Jesus' time, most of would like a Christ who conforms to the wisdom of our times and to our expectations of Christ. How much of our struggle with faith is because we need or want dramatic signs or because we want a Christ that conforms to the expectations of our times? The true Christ is the Christ who suffered, died, and rose on the third day. It is this Christ who is the power and the wisdom of God.

The final verses of today's Gospel are intriguing. According to St. John, many people started believing in Jesus when they saw the signs he was working. *"But Jesus would not trust himself to them because he knew them all, and did not need anyone to testify about human nature. He himself understood it well."* Since Jesus would not trust himself to people because he understood human nature, it is clear that he understood the negative parts of human nature. How well do we understand human nature, especially the negative parts? In other words, do we really believe in original sin and its effects upon human nature? Selfishness and sin are part of our lives. It is easier for us to be selfish than to be self-giving. We struggle to become the-best-version-of-ourselves.

In reality, many problems in society stem from lack of belief in original sin and its effects. Corporate greed and corruption in business and politics are just a couple of examples. This is why alcohol and drugs need to be regulated. This is why dress codes are needed in schools and work. Laws and rules are designed to protect people's rights and the common good of the community in the face of original sin. Because of original sin and its continuing effects, one cannot assume people will do the right thing.

Most people think of the Ten Commandments as the laws or rules God first imposed on Israel in the Old Testament and now imposes on us. In reality, God did not impose the Ten Commandments on Israel. God offered Israel a Covenant. God promised Israel that he would make them his chosen people and that he would give them a rich land flowing with milk and honey, which came to be known as the promised land. For their part, God asked them to keep the Ten Commandments. Israel freely accepted the Covenant God offered, which included their acceptance of the Ten Commandments. The morality of Israel, then, was covenant based.

Likewise, Christian morality is also covenant based. For Christians, morality is not primarily about keeping commandments, laws, or rules or having and living good values. Christian morality is our response in faith and love to God's love for us in Jesus Christ. Covenant morality is relational morality. Therefore, when we talk about sin, we are not talking primarily about right and wrong, good and evil. We are primarily talking about how what we do or fail to do affects our covenant relationship with God and our relationships with others.

My brothers and sisters, only three of the Ten Commandments referred to the Israelites' relationship with God. Seven of the Ten Commandments referred to the Israelites' relationships among themselves. To understand this, we have to understand that God's Covenant with Israel was not a Covenant between God and the individual Israelites. God's Covenant was with Israel. People shared in the Covenant because they were part of the Israelite people. Likewise, the New Testament Covenant is not between God and individual Christians but between God and the Christian community. This suggests that the Christianity of Jesus is, and will always be, a Christianity of church or community and that sins against others are always, and will always be, sins against God.