Peace be with you! Friends, welcome to Lent. This liturgical season actually has a wide variety of titles in our European language. German speakers know that Lent is referred to as “Fastzeit” or the time of fasting. Spanish speakers know this liturgical season as Cuaresma, coming from the word “Forty” for the forty days Jesus prays in the desert. Coming from the far north where the winter days are short and the summer days are long, early Christians marked this liturgical season with the title “Lent,” an Old English word that means to lengthen or stretch. Just as the days grow longer at this time of year, Lent stretches us to grow, to take in more of the light that is Jesus Christ.

What might our spiritual growth look like? Spiritual writer and retreat master Father Paul Murray, O.P. refers to a very common sin that blocks our spiritual growth. He refers to it as “Irish Alzheimer’s Disease.” What is “Irish Alzheimer’s,” you may ask? It’s where you forget everything except your grudges! Growing up hearing German from my grandparents and now having a good command in Spanish, my hunch is that this spiritual condition may apply to almost any group or nationality.

Lent allows us to overcome sin, to grow beyond our resentments. We do so by stretching ourselves towards God through prayer, fasting and almsgiving. We fast so that others may feast through our alms. We may even “fast” from our grudges and resentments so that our interior life becomes a prayer of praise before God rather than a series of ruminations about ourselves.

How? How might we become more prayerful, more reflective this Lent? This is where perhaps the Greek myth of Perseus and Medusa can be helpful. Medusa you may recall from mythology is a Greek goddess who is so powerful that anyone who looks on her will immediately die. Many died looking upon her face. But Perseus is able to look – not at her – but at a reflection of her in his shield and, by looking at her reflection overcome her power.

The same is true in our spiritual life. If we look directly at our failings, we will become depressed. If we directly study our shortcomings, we will become disheartened. If we gaze directly at the evil and the sin, we will die of discouragement and, as St. Ignatius reminds us, discouragement is never from God.

But have no fear! If the Irish have given us “Irish Alzheimer’s,” they’ve also given us a great medicinal prayer against sin. It’s the famous “Breastplate” prayer attributed to St. Patrick. This prayer of St. Patrick suggests when confronting sin, we look, not at the sin directly, but, like Perseus, we look at the shield that is our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. There are many versions of this prayer so permit me to close with this version adapted for the recently deceased Archbishop Alexander Brunett of Seattle as an offering for you this Lent:
Christ as light,
Illumine and guide me!
Christ as a shield,
O’ershadow and cover me!
Christ, be under me!
Christ, be over me!
Christ, be beside me!
Left hand and right!
Christ, be before me!
Behind me, about me!
Christ, this day be within
and without me!
Christ, the lowly and the meek,
Christ the all-powerful,
Be in the heart of each
To whom I speak –
In the mouth of each
Who speaks to me –
In all who draw near to me,
Or see me or hear me!