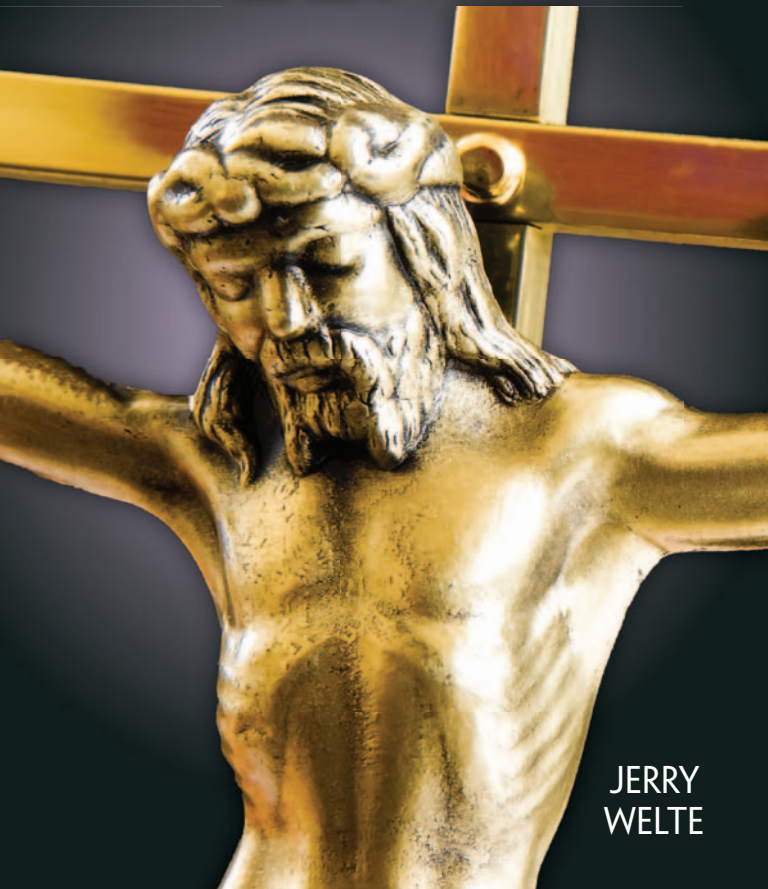


UNDERSTANDING LENT



JERRY
WELTE

*Turn to me and be saved,
all the ends of the earth!
For I am God, and there is no other.
—Isaiah 45:22*

LENT IS A TIME FOR TURNING

*Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies,
it remains just a single grain; but if it dies,
it bears much fruit. —John 12:24*



Lent is a season for turning. As autumn leaves turn and die every year in preparation for the new birth of Spring, so do the followers of Christ turn each Lent, dying to themselves to invite the new life of Easter. It is no accident that the season of Lent begins during winter, for the cyclical, “death to life” rhythms of nature mirror the process of rebirth that Lent fosters. The word Lent is itself derived from an Old English word *lencten*, which means *Spring*.

This cyclical, regenerative dynamic of Lent is reflected in the symbolism of Ash Wednesday. The ashes that are traced in the sign of the cross on the foreheads of the faithful are made by burning palms from the previous Palm Sunday. The entire liturgical year, then, celebrates the circle of God’s life, the Lord’s ability to “make all things new.” The invocations used during the distribu-

tion of ashes remind us of our mortality and of God's call to holiness: "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return" and "Turn away from sin and be faithful to the gospel."

The 40 days of the Lenten season are significant because the number 40 appears repeatedly in scripture as a sign of intensive spiritual preparation. As Moses makes ready to receive the Ten Commandments, "He was there with the Lord forty days and forty nights; he neither ate bread nor drank water" (Exodus 34:28). Jesus fasted for 40 days and 40 nights before beginning his public ministry. Lent begins on Ash Wednesday and ends with the Holy Saturday Easter Vigil. This means there are actually 46 calendar days in Lent, but the six Sundays of Lent are not officially counted because every Sunday celebrates Christ's resurrection.

From the earliest days of the Church, there is evidence of a period of prayer and fasting in preparation for Easter. This observance gradually becomes more formal and universal, especially after Christianity is made legal in 313.



St. Athanasius

The Council of Nicea in 325 makes reference to "the 40 days of Lent." In 373, St. Athanasius urges his congregation to make a 40-day fast prior to a more intensive fast during Holy Week. Pope Leo I, who

reigned from 440 to 461, proclaims that the faithful must “fulfill with their fasts the Apostolic institution of the 40 days.” By the end of the fourth century, the 40-day period of prayer and fasting called *Lent* is firmly in place.

The Second Vatican Council strived to reemphasize the significance and centrality of the season of Lent in the life of the Church. *The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* states that: “The season of Lent has a twofold character: primarily by recalling or preparing for baptism and by penance, it disposes the faithful, who more diligently hear the word of God and devote themselves to prayer, to celebrate the paschal mystery. This twofold character is to be brought into greater prominence both in the liturgy and by liturgical catechesis.”

TURNING TO GOD

Yet, even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping and with mourning.

—Joel 2:12



Lent is a season for turning to God. It is a time of conversion. We often think of “converts” as people prepar-

ing to enter the Church for the first time, but Lent reminds us that all Christians are constantly called to conversion. The word *conversion* derives from the Latin word *convertere*, which means to turn around, to transform, or to change completely.

The Lenten scriptures provide the spiritual foundation for our turning or returning to God. In the book of Hosea, Israel is compared to an unfaithful lover whom God invites to come back: “The Lord said to me, ‘Go,



love a woman who is an adulterer, just as the Lord loves the people of Israel, though they turn to other gods” (Hosea 3:1). Jesus tells the parable of the Prodigal Son to proclaim how God’s boundless mercy calls us home:

“I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you” (Luke 15:18).

For this reason, the sacrament of Reconciliation is given a special focus during the Lenten season. Along with receiving the Eucharist at least once a year as part of their Easter duty, the faithful are encouraged to celebrate the sacrament of Reconciliation. Many parishes schedule communal penance services and First Recon-

ciliation during Lent, affording penitents the opportunity to approach individual priests to receive particular absolution for sins.

Prayer

Prayer is the first of the three great disciplines of Lent that facilitate conversion and promote communion with God and neighbor. The Church urges more regular and intensive prayer during Lent as a channel for listening to God's voice while offering praise, thanksgiving, petition, and contrition. Many faith communities expand their usual opportunities for prayer by sponsoring Lenten missions, evenings of reflection, scripture studies, or retreats. When it comes to prayer, Christ suggests that the squeaky wheel gets the grace: "Ask and you shall receive."



The Ash Wednesday gospel insists that prayer be an authentic dialogue rather than a mere show: "Whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you" (Matthew 6:6). Still, communal and liturgical prayer are equally rich and effective vehicles of divine grace. When we partake of the Eucharist, after all, we "communicate" with the Lord and become one body in Christ.

TURNING INWARD

*Mary treasured all these words and pondered them
in her heart. —Luke 2:19*



Lent is season for turning inward. It is a “time out” from the hectic nature of our usual schedules and the often materialistic or trivial ways of the world. In an increasingly extroverted culture that pays a great deal of attention to externals, Lent is a time to focus on internal matters. Mary is the model of the true disciple who receives God’s word openly and reflects upon it deeply.

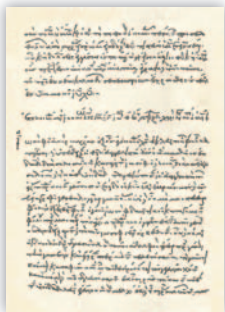
It is instructive that one of the definitions of the word *quarantine* is “a period of 40 days,” especially 40 days of isolation from those who are ill. In the eyes of faith, sin is a spiritual “dis-ease,” a malady that leaves us distanced from and uncomfortable with God and neighbor. Initially, the early Church gave ashes only to those who were regarded as serious sinners. These

penitents were asked to perform public penance until Holy Thursday. After they had completed their penance, they made their confession and were reconciled to the Church at Easter. Initially, then, ashes were a symbol of quarantine for the purpose of atonement or at-one-ment.

Fasting

Fasting is the second great discipline of Lent, a vehicle for turning inward in order to purge ourselves of the pursuits that distance us from God or others. Jesus showed us the way when he prepared for his public ministry by fasting 40 days and 40 nights in the desert. As with prayer, the Ash Wednesday gospel insists that fasting be a private matter rather than an occasion for spiritual theatrics: “Whenever you fast, do not look dismal like the hypocrites; for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting” (Matthew 6:16). We do not fast in order to impress the Lord, but to empty ourselves, making space in our lives for God and others.

The evolution of Lenten fasting is chronicled in the *Didache*, a second-century record of early Christian life. Initially, Christians fasted on all Wednesdays



The *Didache*

and Fridays of the year. By the third century, seasonal fasting was emphasized, with a stricter fast imposed from Good Friday to Easter. In time, this shorter fast evolved into the 40-day observance of Lent. Currently, Catholics between 18 and 60 years of age fast on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. They may take one full meal a day and two smaller meals, but no solid food between meals. Catholics 14 and over abstain from meat on Ash Wednesday and all the Fridays of Lent.

The Scrutinies

The Lenten spiritual dynamic of turning inward is never more clear or forceful than during the final three Sundays of Lent when the rites known as “The Scrutinies” are celebrated in the midst of the entire faith community. In these catechumenal rites of purification, the candidates for baptism become the impetus for all the faithful to assess their faithfulness to the gospel and their worthiness of Christ. The description of the scrutinies in the official rite makes this clear: “This is a period of more intense spiritual preparation, consisting more in interior reflection than in catechetical instruction, and is intended to purify the minds and hearts of the elect as they search their own consciences and do penance. The scrutinies are rites of self-searching and repentance.”

TURNING TO OTHERS

Is not this the fast that I choose? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry? —Isaiah 58:6



Lent is a season for turning to others. We come out of ourselves and go out of our way to help the poor, to welcome the outcast, and to reconcile the enemy. We know that our meditative prayer and reflective silence have been fruitful if they result in greater charity, compassion, and mercy on our part. Vatican II's *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* underscores this point: "During Lent penance should not be only internal and individual, but also external and social."

Almsgiving

The third great discipline of Lent turns us outward to attend to the needs of others, especially the poor. We give alms by offering our time, talent, and treasure to serve others most in need. Just as with prayer and fasting, the Ash Wednesday gospel bids us to give alms as privately as possible so as not to seek undue praise or attention for our actions: "Whenever you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is

doing” (Matthew 6:2). Many faith communities sponsor additional initiatives for the poor during Lent as communal opportunities for almsgiving.

Hospitality and Reconciliation

The outward dimension of Lent is also a way of breaking down the walls of personal prejudice that we use to distance or exclude others.



The way of Christ is a way of inclusion that often scandalized the religious leaders of his day: “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them” (Luke 15:2). By welcoming the outcasts of our day, we are welcoming the Lord: “Just as you did it to one of the least

of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (Matthew 25:40).

Lent is also a time to reconcile with family members, friends, and neighbors. It is a season to end estrangements, let go of bitterness, and resolve grudges. The Lord makes it clear that the work of building bridges of reconciliation is a divine priority: “If you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, first be reconciled with your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift” (Matthew 5:23-24).

Finally, making reparation for our offenses is an important component of Lenten reconciliation, as is made clear in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: “The penitent’s acts are repentance, confession or disclosure of sins to the priest, and the intention to make reparation.” Reparation may consist of stolen goods to be returned, damaged property to be repaired, or a tarnished reputation to be restored. Zacchaeus is the gospel model for Lenten reparation: “If I have defrauded anyone of anything, I shall repay it four times over” (Luke 19:8).

TURNING TO THE CHURCH

Day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved. —Acts 2:47



For the faithful, turning to the Church is turning to God. Catholics recognize the distinction between God

and the institution, but for them the Church is the community where they most intimately and tangibly encounter Christ. As the body of Christ on earth, the Church is where Christ most speaks to them, heals them, forgives them, and sends them forth. This is why many parishes do outreach during Lent, striving to welcome back those who have been estranged for any reason.

The restoration of the catechumenate as the normative process for welcoming new believers into the faith is a pivotal point in the history of the Church. *The Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults* (RCIA) is a personal and visible focal point of Lenten renewal for the entire body of Christ. Adult candidates for baptism form a symbiotic relationship with the faithful. The faithful inspire and affirm the catechumens in their journey to the Easter sacraments, while the catechumens in turn move the faithful to examine their own faith and fidelity to the gospel.



On the first Sunday of Lent, catechumens from all over each diocese gather with the bishop for the Rite of Election. This is their formal selection for the Easter sacraments and it marks their exhilarating entrance into the

season of Lent, the period of enlightenment and illumination. As the faithful walk with the catechumens to the Easter sacraments, they naturally examine their own worthiness as members of Christ's chosen or elect: "Many are called, but few are chosen."

"In these days, let us add something beyond the usual measure of our service, such as private prayers and abstinence in food and drink. Let each one, over and above the measure prescribed for him, offer God something of his freewill in the joy of the Holy Spirit."

—St. Benedict
Rule for his monks

TURNING TO THE LIGHT

I have come as light into the world, so that everyone who believes in me should not remain in the darkness.

—John 12:46



All of Lent is ultimately a turning toward Christ, the light of the world. As flowers naturally turn toward the sun for its warmth and energy, so does the Church eagerly turn to the Son for his grace and glory. In the Eastern rite of baptism, it was common to have the newly anointed catechumens turn from the west to the east as a sign of leaving behind the darkness in order to embrace the dawn. As the Church enters Holy Week, this turning toward the Light of the World reaches its spiritual and liturgical climax. We follow Christ to Jerusalem, we gather at his table, we stand beneath his cross, and we keep faithful vigil at the tomb of his resurrection.

Understanding Lent was written by Jerry Welte.

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