



Sixth Sunday of Ordinary Time February 15, 2015 B

NEXT WEDNESDAY BEGINS OUR LENTEN JOURNEY

This Wednesday, millions of Catholics across our nation will go to their local church to receive ashes on their forehead. Why ashes? In the religious realm, ashes have a twofold meaning:

- They are a stark reminder of our mortality. Hence, the words: *“Remember, man, you are but dust and unto dust you shall return.”*
- Ashes are a sign of repentance. In ancient Israel, when people felt convicted of sin and were moved to repentance, they put on ‘sackcloth and ashes.’ On Ash Wednesday, as the minister places the ashes on our forehead, he/she will say: ***“Turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel.”***

In the first reading next Wednesday, the prophet Joel will say to us: *“Render your hearts and not your garments.”* Commenting on this verse, Thomas Merton said: *“Rending only our garments lets in nothing but the cold air, but rending our hearts lets out sin and lets in the clean air of God’s spring.”*

The word “Lent” means “spring.” Lent is intended to be a new spring in our lives, a time when we invigorate our faith. Lent calls us to a change of heart, attitude and behavior. If we go through all the rituals and prayers and Masses of Lent but nothing is changing in our attitude and behavior, Jesus may say to us what he said to the Pharisees: *“This people honors me with their lips but their hearts are far from me.”*

The late Fr. Henri Nouwen said: *“Jesus does not speak of a change of activities...or even a change of pace. He speaks of a change of heart. This makes everything different, even while everything appears to be the same.”*

So, ideally, when we come to church next Wednesday to receive ashes on our forehead, we are publicly saying to the Lord: “I want, with the help of your grace, to change my heart where change is needed.”

We may think we are pretty good and decent people and may wonder what it is we need to repent of. This is not an easy question to answer. Despite the fact that the vast

majority, if not all of us, live good and decent lives, the truth is also that many of us, including myself, may be *blind* to what needs changing in our lives. All too many of us live ‘spiritually drowsy’ lives. We are so busy living our daily lives that we become deaf or at least hard of hearing when it comes to listening to the voice of the Spirit who is constantly nudging us to change what needs to be changed in our lives.

How many of us take time to come aside from our busy schedules to be quiet before the Lord? How many of us take time to ask the Holy Spirit to help us hear what he may be saying to us in the events and encounters of daily life? How many of us live life reflectively? We can be sure that God is always seeking to communicate with us. But who is listening? How tuned in are we to the Holy Spirit? There are so many voices seeking to get our attention that the voice of the Holy Spirit may be drowned out.

The first thing many of us may need to repent of is our failure to take time to sit quietly before the Lord so that we can hear and discern his word for us. I realize that that can be a tall order because we may feel that God never speaks to us. If we feel that way, we can assume that, spiritually, we may be hard of hearing.

If we feel that God rarely or never speaks to us, our first Lenten prayer might be: “Lord heal my spiritual deafness. Open the inner ears of my heart so that I can hear your word and promptings and call to conversion.” That prayer in itself is wonderful because it expresses a *desire* to hear and respond to our Lord. Literally millions of people have no such desire. They are too busy with other stuff. When it comes to following the Lord’s direction for my life, I am comforted by the following well known words of Thomas Merton: *“I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it.”*

Spiritual smugness

I believe that one of the biggest dangers that we who are ‘good and decent Catholics’ have to face is the tendency to fall into a kind of ‘spiritual smugness.’ We may feel that there is little or no need for change in our lives

because we say our prayers, go to Church, contribute to the support of our parish, and try to be nice to everyone. What more could be asked of us? The gospel answer is—uncomfortably—a lot more.

As Christians, our model is always Christ who gave his whole life that we would escape hell and enjoy eternal life with him. When we look at our lives through the lens of the Gospel, we are *always* falling short. I don't say that to make you feel bad about your Christian walk. I say it because the reality is that we *are always falling short* of who or what we ought to be as disciples of Jesus; hence, the need for what we call *ongoing conversion*. Our 'life in Christ' is always calling us to change our hearts, attitudes, mindsets and behaviors that are not fully conformed to those of Jesus. Our life in Christ is always calling us to be more something . . . more generous, more forgiving, more compassionate, more loving, more humble, more gracious and more prayerful. One reason saints often went to confession is because they were deeply aware of their need for a deeper conversion in their walk with Christ. A little prayer I recently came across goes:

*Disturb us, O Lord,
when we are too well pleased with ourselves,
when our dreams have come true
because we dreamed so little;
when we have arrived in safety because
we sailed too close to the shore.*

Lent's Baptismal Focus

In the early church, Lent had a strong baptismal focus. For the *Elect* (i.e., those discerned by church leaders to be spiritually ready to receive the Sacraments of Initiation, Lent was their *final period of preparation* before receiving the Easter Sacraments (Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist) at the Easter vigil. This final period of preparation was and continues to be called the *Period of Purification and Enlightenment*. Through fasting, penance, almsgiving and scrutiny rituals, the *Elect* are purified of sin. Through ongoing reflection on God's word, they are *enlightened* by the wisdom of God.

This Lent, we have 10 adults and 7 children preparing for the Sacraments of Initiation on Easter. Our role is to support these brothers and sisters with our prayers and good example.

In the early church, Lent for the *already baptized* was a time to look at how well they were living their baptismal call to be faithful disciples of the Lord. For us who are already baptized, the primary focus of Lent is *repentance*. This year, as we reflect on the Cycle B readings, our focus is renewing our covenant with the

Lord. All of us become distracted and lose that total focus we should have on the Lord. As a result of our Lenten journey, each of us, ideally, should find ourselves a little more committed to the Lord. If we don't, Lent this year will be have been in vain. We may have gone through the motions but nothing on the inside or in our behavior may have changed.

Three traditional Lenten practices to help us on our way

In the Gospel on Ash Wednesday, Jesus will speak to us about praying, fasting and almsgiving. During his forty days in the desert, he was engaged in extensive prayer and fasting.

Prayer

Prayer is turning to God. It involves making space for God in our lives. Authentic prayer involves "allowing God to have his way with us." In prayer, we stand, sit or kneel, vulnerable before God, asking him to show us where and how we need conversion and healing in our lives. During Lent, a special form of prayer is the *Stations of the Cross*. We prayerfully accompany Jesus on his road to Calvary. Consider coming at least one time to our Friday Stations at 5:30 pm. Or you can meditate on the Stations of the Cross daily or weekly with family members or by yourself using the insert in this bulletin. After the Stations, there will be a Lenten soup supper in the parish hall. As a daily devotional, you can read the small Lenten booklet available after Mass today which contains a series of reflections on the Daily Mass Readings for Lent. You can join a Small Group that reflects on the upcoming Sunday readings.

If you prefer to do your own personal prayer and study, check out our website for articles I have written on the Books of the Old Testament, the Catechism, Church History, and more.

Fasting

If Jesus fasted, we need to fast too (unless our doctor tells us not to). Fasting can take many forms: less TV, alcohol, Internet, shopping, negative talk. But we should all consider doing *some* form of fasting from *food (and sugary drinks)*. Food is what Jesus fasted from. We need to experience some hunger in the belly to identify even just a small bit with starving people and to get in touch with the hungers of the soul. Ideally, our fasting is a means to an end. We fast from some shopping so that we may give to the poor. We fast from a half hour of TV to make space for prayer.

Almsgiving

Almsgiving is our way to reach out to the poor by sharing our money, clothing and food. We can give gifts

of food, money and clothing to our *Thrift Store and Social Concerns* office (both located on Aurora Road, a half mile west of U.S.1). Another form of almsgiving that we might consider for Lent is forgiving someone who may have hurt us. Of this important kind of almsgiving, St. Augustine said: “*There are many kinds of alms, the giving of which helps us to obtain pardon for our sins; but none is greater than that by which we forgive from our heart a sin that someone has committed against us.*”

Operation Rice Bowl is a ministry of *Catholic Relief Services*, designed to help the poor in our world. On Ash Wednesday, you will be offered a Rice Bowl, a Lenten calendar (which includes a prayer ritual, a thought for the day and other practices). You may return your Rice Bowl donation on Palm Sunday or Holy Thursday.

Prayer, fasting and almsgiving, like three legs of a tripod, make up the traditional Lenten practices. Prayer nourishes our spirits. Fasting disciplines our bodies, helps us seek the Lord with greater intensity, and puts us in solidarity with those who suffer. Works of charity enlarge our hearts as we commit ourselves to the good of others. Properly utilized, fasting, prayer and almsgiving can bring about a change of heart. They are not the point of Lent but rather spiritual aids that help us ‘put on Christ’ a little more.

Many possibilities

Many spiritual exercises are available to us this Lent. Each of us has to decide which one(s) will help us to renew or deepen our relationship with the Lord. I encourage you to seek the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit as you think about a Lenten focus: “Holy Spirit, help me to see where conversion and a change of heart is needed in my life.” If we suffer from a bad temper, a decision to work on controlling it more would be an excellent Lenten exercise. If we are still carrying a resentment, we should consider “giving it up.” What better thing to give up than a resentment which daily hurts us emotionally, spiritually and even physically. If we only pray in a rote way and rarely take time to sit quietly and speak before the Lord from our hearts; if we rarely engage in spiritual reading; if we seldom take time to just *listen* to our Lord—maybe this Lent we should consider changing all that and strive to grow closer to our Lord each day. If we are a doer type of person, we can volunteer some of our time each week at our Thrift Store.

Pope Francis says:

Pope Francis urges Catholics to pray for the conversion of our hearts and to give up a culture of indifference which is becoming more prevalent. “*During this Lent,*

then, brothers and sisters,” Pope Francis says, “let us all ask the Lord: Fac cor nostrum secundum cor tuum—Make our hearts like yours. In this way we will receive a heart, which is firm and merciful, attentive and generous, a heart which is not closed, indifferent, or prey to the globalization of indifference. It is my prayerful hope that this Lent will prove spiritually fruitful for each believer and every ecclesial community.”

A LENTEN PRAYER

*Loving God,
You formed us from the clay of the earth
and breathed into us the Spirit of life,
but we have turned from your ways and sinned.
Bring us back to you.
Change our hearts. Renew our spirits.
Loving God, in a special way,
bless our brothers and sisters
who are preparing for Baptism
and entrance into our Church.
Purify and enlighten our minds and hearts.
This we pray through Christ, our Lord. Amen.*

GUIDELINES FOR LENT AND EASTER

**Ash Wednesday and Good Friday
are days of fasting and abstinence.
Fridays of Lent are also days of abstinence.**

Fasting, almsgiving, and prayer are the three traditional disciplines of Lent. The faithful and catechumens should undertake these practices seriously in a spirit of penance and of preparation for Baptism or of renewal of Baptism at Easter.

Fasting is to be observed by all 18 years of age and older who have not yet celebrated their 59th birthday. On a fast day, one full meal is allowed. Two other meals, sufficient to maintain strength, may be taken according to each one’s needs, but together they should not equal another full meal. Eating between meals is not permitted, but liquids, including milk and juices, are allowed.

Abstinence is observed by all 14 years of age and older. On days of abstinence, no meat is allowed. Note that when health or ability to work would be seriously affected, the law does not oblige. When in doubt concerning fast and abstinence, the parish priest should be consulted.

Have a blessed week,

