

FROM THE PASTOR'S DESK



8th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME - February 26, 2006 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:

- It is a stark reminder of our mortality. Hence the words: “Remember, man, you are but dust and unto dust you shall return.”
- Ashes are also 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 says:

*“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 which 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 attitudes 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 says:

“Jesus does not speak of a change of activities . . . or even 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 came to church next Wednesday and come forward for ashes, we are publicly saying to the Lord; “I want, with the help of your grace, to change my heart where change is needed.”

Now all of you reading this column are pretty good and decent people and you may wonder what it is that you need to repent of. This is not an easy question to answer. Despite the fact that those vast majority of you, if not all

of you, live good and decent lives, the truth is also that the vast majority of us, including myself, are *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 are deaf or at least hard of hearing when it comes to hearing the voice of the Spirit who is constantly nudging us to come close to him.

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.

So the first thing many, if not most 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 can be a tall order because many of you may feel that God never speaks to you. If you feel like that assume that you have become spiritually deaf if you don’t mind me saying so.

If we feel 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 a wonderful one 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 words of Thomas Merton:

The fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But 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 danger of falling 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 came across recently says:

*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 Sacrament 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* were purified of sin. Through ongoing reflection on God's word, they were *enlightened* by the wisdom of God.

This Lent we have 6 Adults and 8 children preparing for the Sacrament of Initiation this 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 loose 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 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 5:30PM. After the stations we will offer a Lenten soup supper in the parish hall. Beginning, the second Friday of Lent. March 10th, Jason Asbell will offer sessions on *Breaking Open of the Word*. See page 5 of this bulletin for more on this. For your private devotion consider utilizing one of the Lenten devotional booklets that we spoke about in church today. Also, consider sharing them with others—Catholic and non-catholic.

Fasting

If Jesus fasted, we need to fast (unless our doctor tells us not to. Fasting can take many forms: less TV, alcohol, Internet, shopping, negative talk. But we should all consider *some* form of fasting from *food*. Food is what Jesus fasted from. We need to experience hunger in the belly to identify 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. You can give gifts of food, money and clothing to our *Thrift Store* and *Social Concerns* office. Both are located on Aurora Ave, a half mile west of U.S. 1. Another part of almsgiving that we might consider for lent is the form that forgives another. 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.”

On Ash Wednesday we will have an *Almsgiving Collection*. The offering will go to *Gift of Water* - a ministry operated by parishioners Phil and Barbara Warwick, which aims to bring clean water into the homes of poor families in Haiti and Jamaica. We take so much for granted. Daily we have access to clean water. Consider the plight of children and adults who do not have such access and as a result are vulnerable to so many diseases. We should feel very good that we have in our parish a couple that gives huge amounts of their spare time to provide a most important service to the poor. It is hard to think of a charity more worthy of our support than one whose whole focus is give people access to a glass of clean water. For more information on Gift of Water call Phil or Barbara Warwick at 255-4730 or visit their website; www.giftofwater.org.

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, (includes a prayer ritual, a thought for the day and other practices. You can 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 practices of Lent. 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. And works of charity enlarge our hearts as we commit ourselves to the good of others. Properly utilized, fasting, prayer and almsgiving will facilitate a change of heart. They are not the point of Lent. Rather, they are the spiritual tacks that help us ‘put on Christ’ a little more.

Many Possibilities

Many spiritual exercises are available to us this Lent. Each one 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 you suffer from a bad temper, a decision to work on controlling it more would be an excellent Lenten exercise. If you are still carrying a resentment consider “giving it up”. What better thing to give up than a resentment which daily hurts us emotionally, spiritually and even physically. If you only pray in a rote way and rarely take time to sit quietly before our Lord speaking to him from your hearts, if you rarely engage in spiritual reading or

rarely take time to just *listen* to our Lord—maybe this Lent consider doing that each day or several times a week. If you are a doer type of person, consider spending some time each week at our Thrift Store. On March 12th we are going to have a sign up in church. So I encourage you to seek the help of the Holy Spirit as you consider the focus of your Lenten journey in ‘06.

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.

Have a blessed week,

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