



Lent

Our 40-day Retreat!

Many of our neighbors, maybe some members of our own households, cannot get excited about the special seasons of the Church. Many try to avoid them with a fervent passion. But, there are others that use the seasons as a springboard to draw closer to God. Looking at the definition of “Lent” we see that it means: springtime. A time of renewal!

In scripture we are constantly being called to reform our lives and to live the “kingdom of God.” We hear the call in the words of John the Baptist, in the themes struck by Jesus, in the interaction of other frail communicants and their demands on us. We are repentant all year — in the moments surrounding awareness of our sins, in struggles for a healthier world. Indeed, we generally are conscious of these aspects of life day in and day out. Or, are we really aware of these aspects?

Actually, we need Lent as a concentrated period of time, to put ourselves in touch with the realities of everyday life. We need a time for the community with which we worship to be engaged precisely as a community in the same quest for renewal. The thing to remember is that we do this as COMMUNITY, not just as an individual. This is how Lent or any other liturgical season of the church functions: as a community. Times of feasting and of fasting are shared by many, for who wants to lament alone? Who wants to sit down to a banquet at a table for just one?

In putting ourselves in touch with the realities of everyday life, we see a side of ourselves that we wish to renew or change. Lent is like a wonderful retreat which helps us face these realities. In facing reality we may believe that one area of growth may be more important than another. That is only natural! Renewal (two other words that can mean the same thing are conversion or change) is a never ending process with certain areas being more important than others.

Therefore we still need Lent as a concentrated period of time, to put ourselves in touch with the realities of everyday life. For some, this may include Baptism, which signifies new life or a new creation.

Lent: “Preparing for Baptism or Renewing our Baptism”

In the fourth and fifth centuries a detailed process for becoming a Christians was worked out. When a person

entering the Church came toward the end of this process (called the “Catechumenate”), there was a 40-day retreat during which the catechumens prepared to be fully initiated into the community through their Baptism, Confirmation and admission to the Eucharist during the Easter Vigil. This final period of preparation for Baptism became a part of what we now call Lent. For those already baptized it was a time to encourage the candidates for Baptism and to pray with them. More-over, it was a time to renew their own baptismal promises.

In later centuries, the focus of Baptism shifted from adults to infants and the focus of Lent shifted from Baptismal preparation to penance and almsgiving. The Second Vatican Council, in revising the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* (the RCIA), has restored the baptismal character of Lent. Lent has become one again a “retreat before Baptism.”

For some people Baptism is something that happened a long time ago without much impact on what they do today. But, there are events that have changed us: marriage, become a mother or father, or *our Baptism*. Is Baptism the reason you got out of bed this morning? For some, that may seem a funny question. It really shouldn't be if we fully understand the rich, continuing impact of our Baptism.

The annual forty-day retreat of Lent is celebrated liturgically with a wealth of rites, symbols, gestures, and texts. Together these form the church's liturgy, the prayer shared by all her people.

We must remember that in its classical form and in its present shape, the prayer of Lent is directed toward the initiation of individuals called to enter into Christ's body through the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist. As members of the Church we are called to share the faith with them and to renew our call. Thus, Lent can be a rich opportunity to rediscover the rich, ever-powerful reality of our own Baptism.

Rediscovering our Baptism through Prayer, Fasting and Almsgiving.

If someone told you that you could rediscover the reality of your Baptism through Prayer, Fasting and Almsgiving, would you think they were crazy? When first contemplating this suggestion it would appear that they

were crazy, but we must allow ourselves to be open to the spirit! As stated earlier in this article, the prayer of Lent is directed toward the initiation of individuals called to enter into Christ's body through the Sacraments of Initiation. In the final preparation for these sacraments they are asked to prepare in prayer with fasting and almsgiving. We too are called to do these with them, not only to assist them in their final preparation, but to help us rediscover the meaning of our own baptismal promises.

What are those baptismal promises? Those who have been baptized as adults, particularly those of the Adult Catechumenate, should know clearly what they promise at Baptism. For those of us who were baptized as children, Lent is a good time to recall and reflect upon what our parents and godparents promised for us. The words of the ceremony tell us something of what our "baptismal promises" are about. But the real implications of those words are only learned in living them.

While the words of the Baptism ceremony are not the "whole story" they are a good place to start to understand our promises. At the beginning of the *Rite of Baptism of Children*, the priest or deacon tells the parents and godparents: "You have asked to have your children baptized. In doing so you are accepting the responsibility of training them in the practice of the faith. It will be your duty to bring them up to keep God's commandments as Christ taught us, by loving God and our neighbor. Do you clearly understand what you are undertaking?" They respond: "I do."

Before the infants are placed in the water their parents are asked: "Do you reject sin so as to live in the freedom of God's children?" to this and questions regarding the profession of faith, the parents and godparents respond: "I do." Each Lent the Church asks us to ponder fully these promises and to say once again, "I do."

It is through the three activities of prayer, fasting and almsgiving that we can get in touch with the "I do," and the deeper meaning of our baptismal call. We all know what prayer and almsgiving are about, but fasting can sometimes be confusing. Although fasting can have many beneficial effects, it's not the same thing as dieting. The purpose of fasting is to turn our attention to God and others. Fasting reminds us not only of our dependence on God, but also of the needs of the hungry and the poor. By fasting, we place ourselves in solidarity with suffering people everywhere.

Some suggested ways of Prayer, Fasting and Almsgiving as we prepare to celebrate the season of Lent:

PRAYER

Participate fully in our weekly worship; participate in daily Mass or other forms of communal prayer such as Lenten Vespers each Sunday evening at 5:15 p.m.; or Stations of the Cross following Friday evening daily Mass.

FASTING

Focus on a bad habit you have, such as being overly judgmental or gossiping, and try to break it.

Consider fasting from a certain activity, such as excessive amounts of television, or use this time for more productive activities like reading, praying, walking or some other exercise, or visiting the lonely.

ALMSGIVING

Participate in *Sharing Sunday*.

Volunteer at a local soup kitchen, food pantry, our own Open Door Café or other agency of need.