

THE LENTEN JOURNEY

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In this article we see how the seasons of Advent, Christmas, and Ordinary Time that we have just celebrated in the liturgical year lead us into the season of Lent. We examine and reflect on the reality of sin and the need for and the purpose of penance in our lives. We see how the journey of Lent leads us from the ashes received at the beginning of Lent to the renewal of baptism at Easter. This journey from ashes to water, from death to life enables us to enter more deeply into the process of conversion as we continue on the journey of life that leads us to eternal life with God.

Our Lenten journey is part of the much larger journey – the journey of our lives. Each year we renew this journey on the first Sunday of Advent when the church begins a new liturgical year. We begin again the journey each of us is taking in life as we enter more deeply into the mystery of Christ and allow ourselves to be changed and transformed by it. Each year we continue to grow as we progress in our journey.

The Incarnation

The seasons of Advent and Christmas call us to reflection on the mystery of the Incarnation. What is this mystery of the Incarnation? It is the fact that God takes on our humanity in his Son Jesus Christ, who is both God and a human being. Jesus Christ is one person in two natures – divine and human.

What does this mean for us? I remember sitting in class and being struck very deeply by a statement made by the professor, Fr. Michael Himes. He stated that the Incarnation tells us: *“We are not God and that is good.”* We spend so much time trying to be God - the one in control of our lives - that we fail to be human. Yet to be human is a wonderful thing - so wonderful that God himself chose to take on our human nature. And so it is good to be human.

Fr. Himes has suggested that the Incarnation is not so much *“the revelation of who God is”* but that *“first and foremost, it is the revelation of who we are. The Incarnation tells us what it is to be a human being.”*¹

The Incarnation reminds us not only that we are human beings but tells us that it is good to be a human being – to discover, recognize, acknowledge, and celebrate the goodness in us and in each human being. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, takes on our human nature and shows us how to live the goodness of our humanity.

After the Christmas season, we move into the season of Ordinary Time. Our Sunday Gospel readings are taken from the teachings and deeds of Jesus during his ministry here on earth. As we listen to the teaching of Jesus, we learn how we are called to live. As we reflect on the things Jesus did, we begin to see how we can live as images of Christ in the world.

The Reality of Sin

But we also come to realize that we do not always live as Jesus teaches and shows us. St. Catherine of Siena reflected on this and was moved to prayer:

“When you created man, you were moved by love to make him in your own image....But I know very well that man lost the dignity you gave him; he deserved to lose it, since he had committed sin.”²

When God created us human beings he created us in his image and his likeness. The temptation given to Adam and Eve in the garden is the temptation to refuse this gift of humanity. The serpent says to eat of the fruit of the tree so you can become like God. And so we give into the temptation to be like God rather than like human beings created in the image and likeness of God.

Fr. Himes states: *“The origin of sin, according to the Hebrew tradition, is the rejection of the goodness of being human. It arises from the insistence we human beings are not the image and likeness of God, that we must become something other than and more than human beings in order to be truly like God.”³*

In our sinfulness we do not always understand the goodness of our humanity. We often reject that goodness. But God sends his son, Jesus Christ, to show us the goodness of humanity and what it means to be fully human. Through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ that dignity we lost through sin has been restored.

St. Augustine reminds us: *“He wanted, through his Son, to show us and give us the way he would lead us to the goal he has promised.”⁴*

In the Incarnation, God tells us that it is good to be a human being and in Jesus he shows us how we should live our human lives. In his teaching and his deeds Jesus shows us the way to live. But so often we fall short - we miss the mark. We call this sin.

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The Greek word for sin is *harmatia* which means to miss the mark when shooting an arrow. Shooting arrows at a target we aim for the bull's eye - that little circle in the middle. But we don't always hit the bull's eye - sometimes we hit all the bigger circles around it. Or we may miss the whole target completely and the arrow ends up on the ground. Sin is when we miss the mark - we fail to be all that God has called us to become.

Ash Wednesday

So this brings us to the season of Lent and our Lenten journey. The season of Lent begins on Ash Wednesday and continues until the evening of Holy Thursday when the Easter Triduum begins.

The readings for Ash Wednesday set the tone for the Lenten season. The prophet Joel reminds us that the Lord calls us to *“return to me with your whole heart.”* (Joel 2:12)⁵ We recognize our sinfulness and the need to repent and return to the ways of the Lord by the imposition of ashes on our forehead.

The church tells us the purpose of the ashes is to remind us of *“the human condition of the sinner, who seeks to express his guilt before the Lord in an exterior manner, and by so doing express his interior conversion.”⁶*

We are reminded of the human condition. The second creation account in Genesis 2 tells us that God formed man from the dust of the earth. The ashes remind us that our bodies come from the dust of the earth and will return there when we die. When the ashes are placed on our forehead we hear the words: *“Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.”⁷*

This reminds us of who and what we are - human beings created in the image and likeness of God. But we are the creatures and not the creator. Sometimes we forget this and want to be the creator. These words remind us we are not God and bring us back to God and his ways.

There are alternate words that can be used in the imposition of ashes: *“Repent and believe in the gospel.”*⁸ This reminds us of our sinfulness and challenges us to turn back to the ways of God and be faithful to what Jesus teaches us and shows us in the gospel.

The Way of Conversion

The Church also tells us: *“Led on by the confident hope that the Lord will be merciful, this same sign marks the beginning of the way of conversion.”*⁹

The ashes are an exterior sign of what should be taking place within us. What should be taking place within us is conversion. The entire journey of our life is a journey of conversion. Conversion is the fundamental decision we make to commit our lives completely to God. Bernard Lonergan describes this process of conversion as *“falling in love with God in an unrestricted fashion.”*¹⁰

This process of conversion is not easy and we struggle with it everyday. Sometimes we succeed in this struggle and at other times we fail and miss the mark. We sin. But as Pope Benedict XVI reminds us: *“Christ is not so much interested in how often in our lives we stumble and fall, as in how often with his help we pick ourselves up again.”*¹¹

The season of Lent is the time to pick ourselves up again with the help of God. It is a time for repentance. Repentance is the recognition and acknowledgment of sin. We acknowledge we are not all that God has called us to become.

This leads to confession of our powerlessness over sin apart from God. By giving our lives to God we

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Benedict XVI

return to God with our whole heart and receive the power to overcome our sinfulness. This leads us back to conversion, a change of heart and a total surrender to God in an effort to become all that God created us to be - to follow the way that Jesus shows us.

The Practice of Penance

How can we do this? The Church recommends the practice of penance – internal penance and external penance. Internal penance is *“a conversion of heart toward God and away from sin, which implies the intention to change one’s life because of hope in divine mercy.”*¹²

External penance helps us to do this by certain actions and practices. These practices help us to turn back to God and become all that God has created us to become. Thinking of the ways we fall short - the ways we miss the mark - the ways we sin, we are challenged to choose a penance for the season of Lent that will help us to grow and overcome the sins in our life with the help and strength of God.

Traditionally, we have often thought of Lent as a time to give things up as a sacrifice, such as candy or desert. But there is really more to it than this. One little boy agreed to give up fighting with his brother and sister during Lent. When his father asked him how it was going, he said: *“Great! But I cannot wait until Easter.”*¹³

This misses the purpose of Lenten penance. St. Leo the Great points out the purpose of our acts of penance when he reminds us that *“by the*

*observance of a special strictness a habit is acquired which must be persevered in.*¹⁴

During Lent we adopt practices that will help let go of sin not just for the season of Lent but permanently. We cannot eliminate sin from our lives completely so we really need to concentrate on just one area. That will leave more for next Lent and we have many Lents ahead to allow God to continue his work in us. But each year we can make some progress.

As St. Leo also reminds us: *"...there is still required a daily renewal to repair the shortcomings of our mortal nature, and whatever degree of progress has been made there is no one who should not be more advanced."*¹⁵

So each Lent we try to develop practices that will help us to enter more deeply and fully into the process of conversion – committing our lives completely to God – by eliminating the sins that hold us back. St. Augustine tells us:

*"God means to fill each of you with what is good; so cast out what is bad! If he wishes to fill you with honey and you are full of sour wine, where is the honey to go? The vessel must be emptied of its contents and then be cleansed. Yes, it must be cleansed even if you have to work hard and scour it."*¹⁶

Growing in Relationship

The gospel for Ash Wednesday gives us three actions that can help us during the season of Lent - prayer, fasting, and works of mercy. These actions are really about growing in our relationships.

Prayer strengthens our relationship with God. In prayer we allow God to open us to his loving presence and forgiveness. We allow God to change and transform our lives as we listen to his word especially in the scriptures. Prayer allows God into our lives. Perhaps instead of telling God what we plan to do for Lent, we can open

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Leo the Great

ourselves to allow God to do something beautiful for us by asking God: *"What do you wish to do for me this Lent?"* But we really have to listen and then respond by taking action to what we hear God calling us to do.

This leads us to fasting which strengthens our relationship with ourselves. When we think of fasting we immediately think of depriving ourselves of food. This is a part of fasting. The sense of physical hunger should lead us to a spiritual hunger for the love and forgiveness of God. But our fasting should also deprive us of those things that cause us to sin.

This leads us to reach out in works of mercy which strengthens our relationship with others. This is often referred to as almsgiving and our first thought is another call for money. But St. Leo points out that almsgiving is not just for the rich. It is for everyone because it is more about doing works of mercy than giving money.

*"Those who are unequal in their capacity to give can be equal in the love within their hearts."*¹⁷

Lent is not meant as a time of denying or chastising ourselves but it is really about making our relationships right and strengthening them. Our sinfulness not only affects us. It also affects others and so we need to look at the communal and social consequences of our sin. Sin destroys relationships. Lent calls us to restore and deepen those relationships by changing those things that destroy our relationships.

We are encouraged to receive the sacrament of Penance during the season of Lent as well as at

other times during our journey of life. In the sacrament of Penance we receive forgiveness for our sins and begin again. We call on God to act within us and heal our weakness. We receive the forgiveness of God and reconciliation with the Church and with one another. Reconciliation comes from God who brings us forgiveness, mercy, compassion, and consolation.

Temptations on the Journey

Michael Guinan points out two temptations as we journey through the season of Lent.¹⁸ We see these two temptations as we examine the 40 year journey of the Israelites in the desert. Two temptations faced them and face us - the temptation to stop and the temptation to go back.

The temptation to stop is the desire to settle down - to stay where we are comfortable. During the wilderness journey, the Israelites were not allowed to stop and settle down for any length of time.

“Whenever the cloud rose from the tent, the Israelites would break camp; whenever the cloud came to rest, they would pitch camp. At the bidding of the Lord the Israelites moved on, and at his bidding they encamped.” (Numbers 9:17-18)

During the summers when I was in college, I worked for a large company delivering mail. Each floor was very large and had its own mail room. One person would handle all the mail for the floor. The summer college students would cover these floors while the regular employee was on vacation. So every week or two we would move to a new floor. One summer I was sent to a floor where I got to stay for almost one month since someone had left. It got very comfortable. But one day my manager came and said the person on the 52nd floor was going on vacation. This floor was always disorganized and hard for someone to fill in. But since I had filled in there before, I was familiar with it and so I moved on. This is perhaps a very simple example and not very earth shaking, but it does remind us of the temptation to want to stay where

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we are. I was very comfortable, but thinking of this example always reminds me that as I journey through life God is calling me to new challenges. God is always calling me to move forward in my journey of life. But sometimes I am tempted to stop – to say I have had enough.

Michael Guinan asks us: *“Could this be a temptation we face in our Christian lives? The God of the Bible is a God who calls us continually out of secure and comfortable presents into unknown and risky futures.”*¹⁹

The second temptation is to go back. This does not just stop the journey but it sends it in reverse. For the Israelites in the desert, when things got difficult, their life as slaves in Egypt did not look so bad. At least they had some food to eat when they were in Egypt.

“The people complained against God and Moses: “Why have you brought us up from Egypt to die in this desert, where there is no food or water? We are disgusted with this wretched food.” (Numbers 21:5)

This is nostalgia. Suddenly the past does not look so bad. They forgot the difficulty of their lives as slaves. Sometimes the past does not always look as bad as it really was. Nostalgia is longing to go back to something that was familiar but that can no longer be recovered. But the temptation is to try to recover it and bring it back rather than move on in our journey.

St. Augustine realized this when he wrote:

*“And yet you hear people complaining about this present day and age because things were so much better in former times. I wonder what would happen if they could be taken back to the days of their ancestors – would we not still hear them complaining? You may think past ages were good, but it is only because you are not living in them.”*²⁰

Michael Guinan points out the danger of this temptation:

*“The past looks attractive, more secure, safer. As well it ought! We have already been there; it holds no surprises....We are indeed supposed to remember the past; this is absolutely essential. But when we do this, we bring the past into the present in order to help us live into the future. In nostalgia, on the other hand, we want to bring the present into the past in order to avoid the future.”*²¹

Baptism is the Key

While penance is an important part of the season of Lent, the real key to understanding Lent is Baptism. Ash Wednesday issues the call to begin a journey of interior conversion in which we return to the Lord with our whole hearts leading us to the renewal of baptismal promises at Easter. We turn away from sin to the new life offered us by the risen Christ.

Barbara Reid suggests: *“At the same time the ashes remind us of our mortality, they also recall for us God’s power and love in creating us and in helping us to become the visible face of that love as best we can throughout our lives.”*²²

On Ash Wednesday the Church prays for us as we are marked with ashes that *“as they follow the Lenten observances, they may be worthy to come with minds made pure to celebrate the Paschal Mystery of your Son.”*²³

From the very beginning, Lent points to the celebration of the Paschal Mystery at Easter. The

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Lawrence E. Mick

Paschal Mystery is the work of redemption by which Jesus Christ has saved us, despite our sinfulness, by his suffering, death, resurrection, and ascension. We enter into this mystery at the time of our Baptism.

During Lent we consider the ways we have failed to live up to the promises made at our baptism. During Lent *“the faithful ever more attentive to the word of God and prayer, prepare themselves by penance for the renewal of their baptismal promises.”*²⁴

David Carron points out: *“With the mark of ashes we begin the season of Lent. With the gritty smear of ashes, the stuff that’s left over after something perishes, we begin a journey to new life.”*²⁵

What perishes during Lent should be our sinfulness. Letting go of our sinfulness we journey to new life. We journey from ashes to water, from death to life.

Lawrence Mick points out the connection between ashes and the water of baptism:

*“We dirty our faces on Ash Wednesday and are cleansed in the waters of the font. More profoundly, we embrace the need to die to sin and selfishness at the beginning of Lent so we can come to fuller life in the Risen One at Easter.”*²⁶

On Easter Sunday the Church invites us:

“Dear brothers and sisters, through the Paschal Mystery we have been buried with Christ in Baptism, so that we may walk with him in newness of life. And so, now that our Lenten observance is concluded, let us renew the promises of Holy Baptism, by which we once renounced Satan and his works and promised to serve God in the holy Catholic Church.”²⁷

Conclusion

This is the challenge of the journey of Lent. We recognize the greatness of being a human being created in the image and likeness of God. We celebrate that goodness in ourselves and in all human beings.

But we also recognize that we often miss the mark – we sin. But God does not abandon us in our sinfulness. He sends his Son Jesus Christ to save us. He offers us forgiveness and restores within us the goodness and dignity of humanity created in the image and likeness of God.

But we need to do something about our sinfulness. With the help of God we can take some steps to overcome our sinfulness so we can again experience the life God calls us to. We can

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continue to grow more and more as images of Christ in the world. This is not always easy and we can be tempted to stop the journey or even reverse the journey.

With God’s help we can pick ourselves up when we fall and continue on our life long journey of conversion. We can begin a little more each day to commit our lives to God – the commitment we made at our baptism.

And so we journey from ashes to the water of baptism. We journey from death to sin into life with Christ. We continue to make progress each day as we face new challenges. But if we continue the journey, we will come to the end of the journey and life with God forever.

This takes time. Indeed it takes an entire lifetime. We will not accomplish it all in one Lenten journey this year. But we can take some steps this year knowing the Church gives us many Lenten journeys throughout our life.

NOTES

¹ Michael J. Himes, *The Mystery of Faith: An Introduction to Catholicism*. Cincinnati OH: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2004: 20.

² Catherine of Siena, "On Divine Providence." *The Liturgy of the Hours, Vol. 4*. New York: Catholic Book Publishing Co., 1975: 90-91.

³ Michael J. Himes, *The Mystery of Faith: An Introduction to Catholicism*: 21-22.

⁴ Augustine, "On Psalm 110." *The Liturgy of the Hours, Vol. 1*. New York: Catholic Book Publishing Co., 1975: 228.

⁵ All scripture quotations are taken from *The New American Bible* (Saint Joseph Edition). New York: Catholic Book Publishing Co., 1992.

⁶ *Paschale Solemnitatis: Circular Letter Concerning the Preparation and Celebration of the Easter Feasts*. Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, January 16, 1988: #21.

⁷ *The Roman Missal* (English Translation according to the Third Typical Edition). Washington DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011: 211.

⁸ *The Roman Missal*: 211.

⁹ *Paschale Solemnitatis*: #21.

¹⁰ Lonergan's understanding of religious conversion is described by Ian Bell in "An Elaboration of the Worshipful Pattern of Experience in the Work of Bernard Lonergan." *Worship*, 81 (November 2007): 521-540.

¹¹ Benedict XVI, "Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI." Vigil with Young People, Freiburg, Germany, September 24, 2011.

¹² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. New York: Doubleday, 1994: Glossary.

¹³ Based on a story told by Lawrence E. Mick., "Lenten Customs: Baptism Is the Key." *Catholic Update* (March 2002).

¹⁴ Leo the Great, "Sermon 49: On Lent XI." Translated by Charles Lett Feltoe from *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, Vol. 12. Edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. Buffalo NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1895. Revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight. Internet: <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/360326.htm> (accessed 12/26/2011).

¹⁵ Leo the Great, "Sermo 6 de Quadragesima" Internet: <http://www.yenra.com/catholic/prayers/leoonlent.html> (accessed January 8, 2012).

¹⁶ Augustine, "On the First Letter of John." *The Liturgy of the Hours, Vol. 3*. New York: Catholic Book Publishing Co., 1975: 221.

¹⁷ Leo the Great, "Sermo 6 de Quadragesima"

¹⁸ See Michael D. Guinan, "In the Desert with Jesus: Biblical Themes of Lent." *Catholic Update* (February 2005).

¹⁹ Michael D. Guinan, "In the Desert with Jesus: Biblical Themes of Lent." *Catholic Update* (February 2005).

²⁰ Augustine, "Sermon Caillau - Saint Yves." *The Liturgy of the Hours, Vol. 4*. New York: Catholic Book Publishing Co., 1975: 134.

²¹ Michael D. Guinan, "In the Desert with Jesus: Biblical Themes of Lent." *Catholic Update* (February 2005).

²² Reid, Barbara, "What's Biblical about...Ashes?" *The Bible Today*, 48 (March 2010): 105.

²³ *The Roman Missal*: 210.

²⁴ *Paschale Solemnitatis*: #6.

²⁵ Caron, David, "Lenten Seasonal Environments: Proclaiming, Catechizing, and Forming." *Liturgical Ministry*, 19 (Spring 2010): 94.

²⁶ Mick, Lawrence E., "Ash Wednesday: Our Shifting Understanding of Lent." *Catholic Update* (February 2004).

²⁷ *The Roman Missal*: 382.

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