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A time for conversion

Bishop John Folda

With these words on a Wednesday in March, we will mark the beginning of the holy season of Lent. Or, perhaps you will hear a more traditional exhortation: “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

With these challenging and somewhat somber words, we launch into the 40 days of Lent, a time of grace for the Church and for each of the faithful who take these words to heart.

Lent is a special time of conversion, a turning back to the Lord from the errors of sin. The word “conversion” actually has a more nuanced meaning. It implies not only turning to the Lord, but turning with the Lord, walking together with him once again, accompanying him in the way of holiness and truth.

Conversion isn’t only for those who are entering the Church for the first time, although this is certainly a powerful and vivid expression of conversion. Rather, all of us are called to ongoing conversion, a permanent state of self-examination and repentance from sins both great and small.

The onset of Lent puts this call to conversion front and center, just as the ashes of Ash Wednesday are placed on our foreheads as a stark reminder of this universal need to turn away from sin and walk once more with the Lord.

From one life to the next

As we contemplate the call to repentance and conversion, Lent also confronts us with our own mortality and our eternal destiny. The sign of ashes and the words, “Remember you are dust,” are a stark reminder that our time on this earth is finite, and we must be ready to make an accounting for our lives.

As Paul tells us in the liturgy for Ash Wednesday, “Now is the very acceptable time, now is the day of salvation.” In other words, now is the moment to acknowledge the passing nature of our earthly lives so that we can be ready for the new and infinitely better life that awaits us.

There is, of course, no better way to prepare for this reality than through the sacrament of reconciliation.

Pope Francis recently commented that even though he is confident of God’s mercy, he also knows that he needs to confess his sins to a priest, and he does so every two weeks. What a sterling example of humility and honesty!

Like our Holy Father, we all should avail ourselves of the healing of reconciliation during Lent, so that we can experience God’s mercy once more and be truly ready to stand before him without fear at the end of our earthly lives.

From darkness comes light

I once read a description of Lent as a time of “bright darkness,” and I find this image intriguing. Lent does indeed have a certain sober character about it: the sign of ashes on the forehead, the penitential violet vestments worn at Mass, the restrained music of the liturgy and the emphasis on fasting and repentance. But, the darker or more somber days of Lent are actually radiant with the grace of God, the light of Christ that illuminates the way toward conversion and holiness. The season of Lent is sometimes approached superficially or with reluctance. But, it should be embraced as a time of grace and new life.

The word Lent itself means “springtime,” and how fitting this name is for the holy season that now begins. Just as springtime is that season when new life springs forth from the earth after the cold and dark of winter, so Lent is a spring-time of the soul.

It is a time of preparation for those who will receive new birth in the baptismal font at Easter, children of God who will die with Christ in the blessed waters and rise from them to a new and everlasting life of grace. But, through a serious spirit of repentance and conversion, it can and should be a season of new life for all of us.

Any time we embark on a sincere journey of repentance, we are moving from darkness into light, from death into life. If Lent arouses any emotion at all, it should be one of joy and gratitude for the opportunities it offers.

The traditional discipline of Lent —prayer, fasting and almsgiving — should characterize the entire Christian life, but it takes on added intensity during these holy days. Perhaps now will be the occasion that we set aside a little more time for reading the Bible, or praying the rosary, or the chaplet of Divine Mercy. Or, best of all, perhaps we will resolve to participate in Mass more frequently, even making an effort to celebrate during the week.

More prayer, different fasting?

Fasting can take many forms, and we often identify it with abstaining from some particular food or drink. But, it might be just as spiritually beneficial to fast from television, or the Internet, or video games or idle talk. Fasting or any type of self-denial from daily pleasures or comforts can strengthen our wills for doing good and for resisting the ever-present temptations that entice us away from our Lord.

In learning to say no to ourselves, we also learn to say yes more readily to our Lord. And, in our personal sacrifices, we are more perfectly united to Jesus as he sacrifices his life upon the cross for our sins.

And finally, almsgiving or charity is the indispensable companion to prayer and fasting. A Lenten observance without charity or almsgiving would be incomplete. Pope Francis has urged the Church to be more mindful of the poor, so the traditional collection during Lent for the poor and hungry is most appropriate.

But our almsgiving might also include the simple acts of visiting a neighbor who is homebound or in a nursing home. Or, perhaps we might offer to lend a hand at a local food pantry or homeless shelter. Through almsgiving or through any act of charity, no matter how small or

hidden, we join ourselves more closely to Christ, who showed the depth of his love for each one of us upon the cross.

Almsgiving allows us to break out of ourselves and turn our attention to another. It conquers our self-centeredness and teaches us to love as Jesus did.

Lent is not a time to be feared or disliked. It is a time of austerity but also of great freedom, freedom from the bonds of sin and freedom for the working of God's grace.

It is a spring-time of the spirit that opens the door to new life in Christ.

So, let us enter joyfully into this journey of penance and conversion, a journey that will allow us to walk with Christ once again.