



Thoughts on the Journey...

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As Lent continues, I look back on my memories of Lent as a young person. As soon as the ashes were rubbed

on my head on Ash Wednesday, it was though a black curtain fell and my world entered the NO-MORE-FUN ZONE. It was the place where wailing, gnashing of teeth, sack cloth and ashes came alive for me in the form of extra chores, limited television, countless hours in church, unappetizing fish meals, more prayers than I cared to pray, good deeds for the neighbors that my mother volunteered me for, confession EVERY Saturday afternoon, and giving up everything that was good in life. Oh, how I dreaded Lent!

That is... until I started attending Easter Vigils in my mid-twenties. All of the sudden, everything came together and made sense to me. The liturgy was a sensual transformation that made Lent meaningful. After 40 days in the desert, we went from darkness to light, from drab to beautiful, from ashes and thorns to incense and the aroma of spring flowers, from somber music to resounding sounds of joyful trumpets and choirs of praise, from dry and parched to the witness of water and new life. Experiencing the contrast between the season of Lent and the celebration of the Resurrection, I began to make the connection between suffering and death and receiving the Spirit of new life.

Sometimes, as Catholic Christians, we are criticized for our preoccupation with sacrifice, self-denial, and the overall emphasis on suffering and death. The questions I often hear are, “why would a loving God want us to suffer?”, “why would we teach happy people to be unhappy?”, “how does it help my faith life to consciously deny myself pleasure?” These are all good questions—all having the same answer; it does absolutely no good if it doesn’t transform you and renew your spirit.

In John’s gospel, Jesus tells us

“...unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit. Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will preserve it for eternal life. “

These words from Jesus were in reference to his upcoming suffering and crucifixion. He himself was anxious about the impending doom he was about to endure. And yet, Jesus glorified his Father in heaven who had the power to stop his suffering. Jesus himself, as God, had the power to stop his own suffering and yet did not. Our salvation relied on Jesus’ suffering, death, and rising to new life. His sacrifice was a living example to the value of redemptive suffering—the suf-

fering that gives us each a share in the cross: the suffering that transforms us and brings us into deeper union with Christ and his Father.

None of us escapes suffering in our lifetime and some of us suffer more than others. But regardless, it is what you do with suffering that makes all the difference between fruitless suffering and suffering that bears fruit. When we die to ourselves and fully embrace the Paschal Mystery, we engage in a cycle that takes us from the old business-as-usual to a spiritual rebirth in thought, word, and behavior. Every time we accept challenges, pain, suffering, and trials, and give glory to God in spite of it all, trusting that God will transform us, new life will come.

Fr. Ronald Rolheiser, in his book *The Holy Longing*, uses the time between Good Friday and Pentecost to help us better understand how suffering can be redemptive and meaningful. He diagrams the paschal cycle as follows:

1. Good Friday... the loss of life—real death.
2. Easter Sunday ... the reception of new life
3. The Forty Days... a time for readjustment to the new and for grieving the old.
4. Ascension... letting go of the old and letting it bless you: refusal to cling.
5. Pentecost... the reception of a new spirit for the new life that one is now living.”

If you take a moment to reflect on the times that challenged you most in your life, you will find that new life came out of each situation. When you have experienced darkness and allowed it to transform you, you become light to others. When you have suffered the loss of a loved one and you let the loss transform you, you value relationships more deeply. When you have lived with shame and guilt and it has transformed you, you come to understand the importance of forgiveness and reconciliation. When you have experienced ridicule and judgement and it has transformed you, you become more merciful. When you have experienced loneliness and you have let it transform you, you will generously reach out to others in love. When you have lived with the fear of not knowing what tomorrow may bring and you trust anyway, you have transformed your fear into hope.

Lent is an opportunity for us to continue the process of transformation and conversion - but, not only in Lent, but throughout our lives. We are pilgrims on a journey back to our Heavenly Father. Like Jesus, let us give glory to God for all we encounter on the road, even the things that challenge us the most.