

Theological Reflection

Why Lent?

We Catholics devoutly make the sign of the cross thereby glorifying the Trinity. We carry rosaries that hold a crucifix. Our churches place the crucifix of Our Lord in a prominent place. All of us have heard countless sermons and homilies about the cross of Jesus. So why do we need more reminding of the importance of Jesus' crucifixion and death? Why does the Church in her wisdom every year, every year of grace, give us Lent? How does his cross affect our lives 2000 years later?

Lent affords us six weeks to ponder and reflect once again on the mystery. We, like all who preceded us who meditated at least once a week on the Lord's passion, can not only understand the mystery of Christianity but can also live it. We can imitate the saints who lived Christianity that made them into "divinely fashioned instruments." Not to be a prophet of doom which is too easy a task in these trying times, but we have clearly seen how the gradual falling away from the voice of Christianity has brought us face-to-face with the sad and confusing condition of this era. Many no longer live according to reason, let alone according to grace.

As we move farther from the cross we have difficulty living even a natural life. By natural life we mean what makes us human – our intellect, will, memory, feelings and emotions, our compassion and conscience. We are to love these parts of us and use them well to God's glory. Our journey is about understanding our facets and to have an ever deepening love of these aspects of our nature placed within us by God. As we grow older we see the divine aspects intertwined with the natural aspects making us whole persons. Such understanding brings us to the point of wonderment at God's power and majesty. The cross brings, with its redemption, supernatural life that in turn enlivens our natural life. How many of us repeat with little understanding, "unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain that build it." St. Augustine writes of the City of God and yet in this modern era we in our pride build our own cities, raising high testimonies to our shallowness and spiritual emptiness. Without consulting the Master Builder, our God, we allow gold to slip through our fingers and we toil in vain.

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And so we walk away from the city of God. Even in the 1930's, theologians wept over the prodigal son, Europe, whose people were enjoying freedom of thought and will. Our lot has not improved. We Christians, we Catholics have not allowed the cross to cast its light upon our political, moral and economic lives. We tried to think like everyone else. Hence is the need for Lent.

Lent is a time to have a change of mind and heart. This blessed time can inform our mind and heart in new ways. We look to the cross for help and courage. Everything that the Father allows holds potential good for us. Happiness and joy this side of the veil extend to heaven the other side of the veil. The crosses in this life are part of our happiness. "There is always continuity in God's plan. He could not have meant that the life of man in time and the life of man in eternity should be of two distinct patterns artificially joined together: a bar of gold riveted to a bar of iron" (Leen, Why the Cross). Our happiness comes not just from the happenings of our life but from how we view these happenings. Our happiness experienced in this world will be carried with us into heaven.

"The Cross" casts light upon our little crosses which are meant to be a part of our happiness because God has allowed them. The happiness that arises from our acceptance of illness, death of love ones, financial problems and/or disaster, infidelities, disappointments, is our companion in this life and walks with us into our heavenly existence. To those who are not followers of Jesus bearing His cross, the previous sentences make no sense. Lent is not for them; they do not have ears to hear its message. The season of Lent is to help us understand the value of suffering and how our acceptance of it makes us like Jesus. Our crosses are part of his Cross; we walk the Via Dolorosa with him. He strengthens us for the journey. He comforts us. He is our sponge dipped in that liquid on Calvary to quench our thirst. We are changed as he walks along with us through our every trial if we have eyes to see and ears to hear.

We need Lent each year to not only remind us of this eternal reality of the God-man's suffering but also how we are a comfort to him being obedient to our crosses and their toll upon our lives. To step back with some new

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perspective looking at Him and ourselves as fellow sojourners bearing our cross, that is what Lent affords us.

So Lent gives us time to think anew, to change our thinking and how we view life. What gives God joy and glory – obviously imitating the obedience of the Son. As Marian Servants one of our charisms, our noticeable mark, is obedience. In Jesus' life it meant the hum-drum existence of 30 years being obedient to heavenly and human parents. In his 3 years of public life obedience played itself out in tireless activities, the demands of the crowds, ridicule and pain. So in our mundane existence of parents, spouses, children, caretakers we are obedient to what lies before us each day but we see it through spiritual and natural eyes. We see the pain, frustration, demands, disappointments, joys and challenges through the eyes of Jesus. Ours like his are filled with tears, as he hangs on the Cross. He longs to close them and to rest but there is still more to do and a few more words to say. We stand by our loved ones in their last agony and we understand the cross in our loved ones' lives. We appreciate the pain of Mary who loved her son from the first moment that he opened his eyes right up to the moment he closed them in death. Some of us have done the same with our children. The cross has many sides.

Most of us easily agree that Pope John Paul II's final years were a poignant testimony to the value of carrying your cross no matter how heavy the burden. He was a living witness to the value of suffering. Some people both within and outside the Church have been critical of the Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI's, "renouncing the papacy" to quote Benedict's own words. His decision points to the many-sidedness of the Cross for his decision reveals the humility of the man willing to put aside the awesome singularity of being the Pope. Knowing his decision would open him to criticism and ridicule, he still chose to step down. John Paul II felt the sting of ridicule for staying the course and Benedict the same ridicule for giving up the chair of Peter. Both men have experienced the calumny of the press and outlandish accusations. Jesus, John Paul II and Benedict XVI tasted the gall of hatred and the opprobrium of men. Both popes carried the cross during Holy Week in the Roman Coliseum for all the world to see and both

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men like Jesus carried their hidden crosses every day. They are our teachers in the faith.

We know the Cross, the weight of it and the glory of it as true Christians. So this Lent we ask our God to lead us into the mystery without fear, filled with the hope of resurrection joy.

[Many ideas were taken from Father Leen's Why the Cross]

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