

Preparing ourselves FOR EASTER



Easter is a movable feast. This year, we celebrate the Vigil on April 20. Harvest will arrive just before we enter the holy season of Lent which prepares us for the joy of Easter.

The sacrament we celebrate at Easter is baptism. As we remember Jesus' resurrection from the dead and the eternal life He won for us, we initiate our new Catholics into life with Christ through this sacrament. Lent, the period of 40 days which comes before Easter, is a time of preparation for that wonderful sacrament and gift of grace. For those who will be baptized, it is a time of prayer and preparation. But, for us who are already baptized, it is a time to prepare ourselves for the renewal of the promises of baptism we will make at Easter Mass. Following the renewal of our promises, we will be sprinkled with the water blessed at the Easter Vigil and used for the baptism of our new Catholics.

How do we prepare ourselves for this renewal? Often, conversation at this time of year turns to things people might be doing for Lent. Usually, some form of sacrifice is involved. We might give up chocolate, or dessert, or a favorite beverage. In that way, Lent can become an endurance contest or even a way to lose weight. There is certainly nothing wrong with making sacrifices or giving up things for Lent, but we always have to remind ourselves why we are doing what we are doing. Otherwise, those sacrifices can become a reason for a feeling of self-accomplishment rather than bringing us closer to God.

We prepare ourselves for Easter by living more intensely the way of life that Jesus called us to. It is our perennial temptation to place ourselves at the center of the universe. Lent is our time to reflect on the fact that we are called into being

by a God who loves us and who asks us to love Him in return. Jesus came among us in order to save us and to show us how to put God first in our lives. Jesus lays out His way of life in the Gospel we hear read on Ash Wednesday (Mt 6:1-6, 16-18). He calls us to prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. In these three connected activities, He shows us what the Christian life should be. In these practices, we will convert our lives and center ourselves on God and His love for us. That is the work of Lent.

Prayer: We begin with prayer, not with our own activities and sacrifices. We need to renew ourselves constantly in a relationship with God. We read many times in the Gospel that Jesus went apart from His disciples so that He could pray and assure Himself that He was doing the Father's will. We do the same. In prayer, we try to join our hearts with Jesus in His prayer, seeking to understand what God wants of us and how God wants us to live.

Fasting: When we have connected with God, we will become more aware of His goodness to us and His love for us. We do this by giving up some of those things that we have considered important in our lives. We will live with less, so we can be attentive to the fullness that God alone can give us. It is not just about our sacrifice; it connects us with the God who has given us everything.

Almsgiving: And, finally, we will acknowledge that we do not stand alone in this world. The Christian life is not just about me and God. We are called

by the Gospel to love one another. We do that by rooting out of our lives those things that threaten the peace of the community — jealousy and envy, anger and bitterness toward others, selfishness and an inordinate concern with my opinion or my needs, cruelty and false judgment. As we do, we will also come to know that we are called to care for the other. We will see ourselves as called to share ourselves and the fruit of the fasting we do during Lent by giving to others. What we save by our fasting becomes a means by which we are able to serve one another in the donations we make to the charitable organizations that help us to serve each other.

The Gospel always brings us in touch with each other. Lent, with its prayer, fasting, and almsgiving, reminds us of that. God has created us for community. The baptism we celebrate at Easter makes us part of a community, the Church. Our Lenten practices of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving renew within us our appreciation of the gift of baptism and a resolve to live it more fully by caring for all God's people.

A further note: In another part of this issue, the fifth anniversary of my installation as bishop of Portland is marked. It is hard to believe that this much time has passed so quickly. It is my privilege to be your bishop. Thank you for your prayers, your support, and your kindness. We go forward doing the work of the Lord, praying for each other and rejoicing in the gift of the Gospel and the hope it gives us. ■



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