

LENT

A PARADIGM OF CHRISTIAN LIVING

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To see Lent only as a period of spiritual practices, penances, and self-imposed deprivations would be distorted and limited. Some understand Lent solely as a time of painful spiritual exercises accepted more or less willingly. But with reflection and by following attentively the Lenten celebrations brought to us by the Church and its liturgy, we come to recognize that Lent is a paradigm of Christian life. We come to recognize the wisdom of St. Benedict's admonition that the lives of Christians and of the Church "ought to be a continuous Lent." Lent is a reminder of our baptismal consecration to lives as other Christs in our circumstances.

Lent is an important time of the liturgical year aimed at redressing Christian life. The works of Lent – prayer, almsgiving, fasting – do not have their value in themselves, as the Scriptures proclaim on Ash Wednesday and the following Thursday and Friday. All actions have a God-centered motive and aim.

In encouraging us to a greater emphasis on private and liturgical prayer, the Church does so to help us to recapture during Lent their rightful place in Christian life at all times.

Almsgiving and sharing practiced during Lent are part of a movement of conversion regarding the use of goods. Far from jealously and selfishly keeping material goods for themselves, Christians learn to possess them not as possessing them. They manage their possessions as good stewards, with constant concern for those less fortunate. This is not an occasional practice either. The ideal continues to be relevant at any time there is a need.

Primarily, fasting concerns restricting our bodily intake of food and drink. Whatever value is assigned to seasonal or even habitual fasting, fasting is essentially an attack on uncontrolled appetite for earthly goods of all kinds. We are called to learn to restrain our greed for earthly goods, and to have concern for the needs of others (Is 58: 6-9). People yield easily to such an appetite, especially in countries where over-consumption is a matter of course. Not to curb the search for bodily and material satisfactions is pagan. Christians seek to rectify their behavior in order to balance their everyday lifestyle in harmony with their faith and hope. The pagans think we should eat and drink, for tomorrow we die. But the dead are raised, and now we know that Christ has been raised from the dead, the first-fruits of all who have fallen asleep (1Cor 15).

The lessons from Scripture proclaimed during Lent help us raise our eyes to God and His plan of salvation, to Christ and His mystery that brings this plan to realization, to its fulfillment here and now in the Church and in the world. Of course, this can be said of all seasons of the liturgical year. What characterize Lenten liturgies are the density, the wealth, and the strength of the texts. Especially challenging are the Gospel readings for Christian initiation, the selected apostolic catecheses, and the remembrance of the most significant steps of salvation history. In this way Lent proves to be catechumenal for all baptized persons and not only for those preparing for baptism. With special insistence Lent repeats the never-ceasing call: "Become what you are."

Lent is a paschal journey because it leads us to the Easter celebrations. It has a fixed place in the liturgical calendar, beginning with Ash Wednesday and ending on Holy Thursday before the evening Mass. But Christian life is wholly paschal because it is an exodus toward our eternal Father. From this point of view, Lent is a parable of the lives of Christians and a paradigm of the Church. What is experienced intensely for forty days must give new and enduring dynamism to our lives in all the days of the Lord.