

Lent: A Time for Inner Cleansing

Kathy Kuczka

Every year my mother would rearrange the furniture in the living room and family room and change the drapes. Then she would open the cupboards and drawers in the kitchen, remove all the dishes, glasses, cups, goblets, plates, pitchers, platters, bowls, casseroles, china, and silverware to clean them. It was as if we were preparing for the biggest banquet of the year. She called this cleansing fury “spring cleaning.”

Every year at this time the Church gives us the opportunity to do some inner spring cleaning. In fact, the word *Lent* is derived from the Anglo-Saxon word meaning “spring.” Lent is a prime time to rearrange our priorities, to open the cupboards of our hearts and hold our egos to the light to see those areas that need to be cleaned and polished. Inner cleansing, or conversion, has always been at the heart of Lent. In the early Church, Lent was the final leg of the journey for the catechumens preparing for Baptism. It was also a time when already baptized penitents, isolated from the assembly because of their sins, would prepare to be reconciled to God and the community. The journeys of the catechumen and the penitent were related in that both embraced conversion. As the catechumen looked forward to Baptism, the penitent looked forward to reconciliation. To this day, the focus of Lent remains both baptismal and penitential.

Return, repent, reconcile, and renew are words that we hear in the liturgies of Lent. A common factor among these words is the prefix *re-*. That prefix expresses the meaning “again,” as in words such as *redo*, *remake*, and *revise*; but it also indicates withdrawal or backward motion, as in words such as *return*, *revert*, and *remember*. During Lent, we are called to change by going back to childlike innocence, simplicity, and joy.

Prayer helps us to return to childlike innocence. Prayer prompts us to withdraw. As Jesus said, “When you pray, go to your inner room, close the door, and pray to your Father in secret” (Matthew 6:6, *New American Bible, Revised Edition*). Prayer nurtures our relationship with God. Prayer also nurtures our relationship with ourselves. Prayer peels away the masks we wear and the layers of ego defenses we think we need to survive. Prayer tells us that it’s okay to be who we really are. Prayer changes us.

Fasting helps us to return to childlike simplicity. Fasting challenges us to trust that God will provide all that we need. Fasting helps us to sort our priorities. Because the digestive system doesn’t have to work as hard when we fast, we have



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more energy to focus on what matters. Fasting creates a hunger for God. Fasting changes us.

Almsgiving helps us to return to childlike joy. Almsgiving moves us to acknowledge how much we have been given and that fills us with gratitude and praise. Almsgiving frees us from fear by compelling us to surrender what we have and who we are to others. Almsgiving requires humility. As Jesus said, “When you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right is doing, so that your almsgiving may be secret” (Matthew 6:2). True humility always leads to joy. Almsgiving changes us.

It is God who calls us to conversion, and it is God’s transforming grace that accompanies us on the Lenten journey as we pray, fast, and give alms. Let us pray for the courage to be open to this grace that we might come to Easter, the biggest banquet of the liturgical year, with hearts cleansed and spirits renewed.