

Catholic

UPDATE

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LENT: A 40-DAY RETREAT REDISCOVERING YOUR BAPTISMAL CALL

A REDEMPTORIST PASTORAL PUBLICATION

When you close your eyes and say “Lent,” what’s the first thing that comes to mind? Go ahead and try it. See what word you think of first.

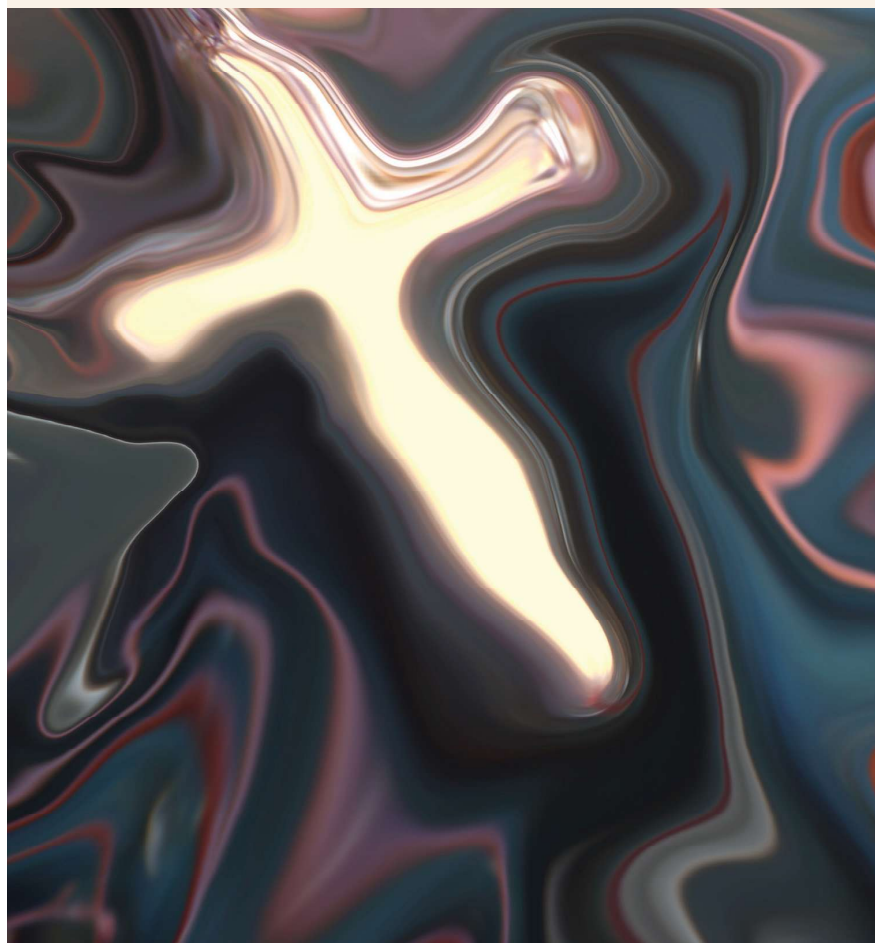
In speaking to different parish groups about Lent, the replies heard most often are penance, purple, fish, ashes, fasting, sacrifice, no movies, and no candy. These are all good answers, but baptism provides the

richest symbol for what we do during Lent. The more we see a link between Lent and baptism, the more we’ll understand the Church’s selection of readings and symbols during the Lenten season.

RETREAT BEFORE BAPTISM

In the fourth and fifth centuries, a person becoming a Christian went through a lengthy process of formation called the “catechumenate.” Near the end of this process, there was a forty-day retreat during which the catechumens prepared to be fully initiated into the community through baptism, confirmation, and admission to the Eucharist during the Easter Vigil liturgy. This final period of preparation for baptism became what we now call “Lent.” For those already baptized, it was time to encourage the candidates for baptism and to pray with them. It was also a time to renew their own baptismal promises.

In later centuries, the focus of baptism shifted from adults to infants, and the focus of Lent shifted from baptism preparation





to repentance. The Second Vatican Council called for the restoration of the catechumenate. The result, the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* (RCIA), has restored the baptismal character of Lent. Lent has become, once again, a retreat before baptism.

For those who are already baptized, Lent can be a great opportunity to rediscover the rich, ever-powerful reality of our baptism. For some people, however, baptism is something that happened a long time ago without much impact on what they do today.

There are events and experiences throughout life that change us and our life as a whole, such as marriage, childbirth, ordination, and baptism. Is baptism the reason you got out of bed this morning? For some, that may seem a funny question. It really shouldn't if we fully understand the rich, continuing impact of our baptism.

BAPTISMAL PROMISES

Those who are baptized as adults, particularly those prepared and baptized through the formation process and rites of the RCIA, should know clearly what they promise at baptism. For those who were baptized as children, Lent is a good time to recall and reflect upon what their parents and godparents promised for them.

The words of the ceremony tell us something of what our baptismal promises are about. But the real implications of those words are only learned in living them. The sacrament of marriage is a parallel case: the words of the wedding ceremony tell us something of promises that the bride and groom make, but the full meaning of their "I do" is discovered day by day throughout their married life.

While the words of the baptism ceremony are not the whole story, they are a good place to start to understand our promises. At the beginning of the *Order of Baptism for Children*, the priest or deacon tells parents and godparents: "You have asked to have your children baptized. In doing so you are accepting the responsibility of training them in the practice of the faith. It will be your duty to bring them up to

keep God's commandments as Christ taught us, by loving God and our neighbor. Do you clearly understand what you are undertaking?" They respond: "We do."

Before the infants are placed in the water, their parents are asked: "Do you reject sin so as to live in the freedom of God's children?" To this and the following questions, the parents and godparents respond: "I do." "Do you reject the glamour of evil and refuse to be mastered by sin? Do you reject Satan, father of sin and prince of darkness? Do you believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth? Do you believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was born of the Virgin Mary, was crucified, died and was buried, rose from the dead, and is now seated at the right hand of the Father? Do you believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting?" Again the response is a final "I do."

It takes a lifetime to realize the meaning of those "I do's." Each Lent, the Church asks us to ponder fully these promises and to once again say, "I do."

ASH WEDNESDAY

At Mass on Ash Wednesday, we hear the call that echoes our baptism: Convert, turn around, "return to me with your whole heart" (Joel 2:12). In the gospel (Matthew 6:1–6, 16–18), Jesus gives us the guidelines for this forty-day retreat: He tells us how we are to give *alms*, *pray*, and *fast* (the three traditional acts of Lenten observance). We are to do these things not in a glum or showy way but in a spirit of generosity. In receiving ashes, we are reminded again of our baptismal commitment: "Repent, and believe in the Gospel."

To turn from sin we must know what sins we face. At baptism, we promised to "reject Satan, father of sin and prince of darkness." How do you name the evil in your life? You probably don't call it "Satan" or "prince of darkness." Those traditional names may not help us identify our task for Lent. But the reality of evil is as dramatic and alarming as the names imply. Today, many Catholics find that their "devils" belong to the "-ism" family: alcoholism, consumerism, drugism, egoism, escapism, materialism, militarism, narcissism, nationalism, racism, sexism. There is much darkness in the "-ism" family.

It can be helpful to have a visible reminder of our Lenten promises. The ashes we receive in church on Ash Wednesday came from the palms used last year on Palm Sunday of the Passion of the Lord. How about using palm ashes in your home or office throughout Lent? Burn last year's blessed palm and put the ashes in a little dish on your kitchen table or desk at work. You can add a touch of purple cloth or ribbon to remind you of the liturgical color of this season.

THE SUNDAYS OF LENT

First Sunday of Lent. Today we hear of Jesus' temptations in the desert. Matthew, Mark, and Luke place the temptations after Jesus' baptism. As we grow more aware of the link between Lent and baptism, we more readily notice the many references to baptism in the Lenten readings. Moses led a people through the waters (think baptism) of the Red Sea into

a desert (a place with no water) for forty years (Lent lasts forty days) where their identity was formed as a people (our journey during this Lent should form us into a baptized people).

Jesus comes up from the waters of baptism in the Jordan and enters the desert for forty days where his identity is revealed (a carpenter becomes the new Moses who forms a new people).

This pattern is ours also: water (baptism), desert (forty days of Lent), new identity. Egyptian slaves become a chosen people; a carpenter from Nazareth becomes the Messiah, a new Moses who forms a new people. *What do we become in this desert? Who does God want us to be? What must we leave behind in the desert this year during Lent?*

On the first Sunday of Lent, you will see the catechumens of your parish state publicly their intention to be members of this Christian community by baptism at Easter. They sign their lives away in the Book of the Elect. *If you had it all to do over again, would you choose baptism? Would you want to join this community? Does your own life contribute in some way to the attractiveness of your parish?*

How can you create a “desert” space during Lent? Perhaps a small space of time set apart without drinking or television or eating or whatever would help you withdraw from your ordinary space to talk to Jesus about your temptations, your “Satan,” and your baptismal promises.

Second Sunday of Lent. Today we hear the story of the transfiguration and see Jesus in his “Easter clothes.” Those elected for baptism this year will receive a white garment at their baptism. They will come up from the baptismal pool dripping wet, dry off, and put on their Easter clothes.

This gospel reminds us of our Easter clothes: “For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:27–28). We might make this meditation our own. Before we can put on that Easter garment (Christ), we must first take off our old clothes, the “-isms” we renounced at our baptism: racism, sexism, militarism, nationalism. We can no longer make decisions based on false stereotypes of Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female.

Third Sunday of Lent. We find Jesus in today’s gospel at a well in Samaria, thirsting. A woman asks for “living water.” She is converted and hastens to make disciples of others. She becomes a model for each of the baptized who has received the water that only Jesus gives. When you withdraw into your desert space during Lent, ask yourself: *What am I thirsty for? What cares and worries occupy my mind and my time? Are these the same things Jesus is thirsting for?* Sometimes we need actual fasting from certain foods or drinks to recognize our true hungers and thirsts.

Several times during Lent you will see those preparing for baptism come forward during Mass to be questioned about their progress, strengthened with the oil of catechumens, and prayed over by the community, their catechists, and godparents. These rituals remind us again of our own baptism and of the strength we received with the anointing at our baptism and

confirmation, not to mention the support we receive from our faith community.

Fourth Sunday of Lent. On this Sunday, we’re reminded of an ancient name for Christian baptism: “Illumination.” In the gospel, we hear of the man born blind and thus walking in darkness. Jesus tells him: “Go wash in the Pool of Siloam” (which means Sent). So he went and washed, and came back able to see” (John 9:7). We have been washed, baptized, in Christ, the One who has been sent. We have been illumined and, by faith, can see things in a new way.

Do we actually see things differently than our non-Christian neighbors? Does hearing the gospel at Mass Sunday after Sunday make a difference in the way we think about poverty, war, drugs, the unborn? Do we let our eyes see too much—images that make us so greedy for possessions or sex or power that we cannot hear the word of God? In your desert place, pray for the gift of true sight: to see as God sees.

Fifth Sunday of Lent. As Lent comes to a close and the night for baptism approaches, today’s gospel gives us a vivid image of our own baptism in the story of Lazarus called forth from the tomb and given new life. We died to sin, were buried with Christ, and were called forth from the tomb and given new life. At baptism, we promised to “reject sin so as to live in the freedom of God’s children.” *Are you really free? In the tomb, Lazarus was bound with strips of cloth. What addictions and memories bind you and keep you from being truly free?*

During the week, remind yourself of this Sunday’s readings. Think of ways in which you can continue these symbols at home or work. Do you still have your baptismal garment? Your baptismal candle or that of your children? Bring them out and put them in your “desert space” to remind you of Sunday’s readings and your baptismal promises.

PALM SUNDAY OF THE PASSION OF THE LORD

“On this day the Church recalls the entrance of Christ the Lord into Jerusalem to accomplish his Paschal Mystery,” reads the *Roman Missal*. Christ enters Jerusalem, and we enter into the holiest week of the Church year. We enter not only figuratively but physically. We gather outside

LENT AND RECONCILIATION

Lent is a good time for the sacrament of penance and reconciliation. As the catechumens prepare to have their sins forgiven in the sacrament of baptism, so those of us already baptized seek to have our sins forgiven in the sacrament of penance and reconciliation, which the early Church referred to as “second baptism.” The *Order of Penance* suggests that the sacrament be complete before the Triduum, that is, before the solemn three days of Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday. This is why many parishes no longer offer the opportunity to celebrate this sacrament on these final days before Easter.

the church and hear the story of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. We take palm branches, carry them in procession, and cry, "Hosanna!" We enter the church and hear an account of the passion of our Lord Jesus Christ. Now we shout, "Crucify him! Crucify him!"

This is not a passion play or a mere retelling of the story of Jesus' death. This is real life. We are the people who so often shout "Hosanna!" one moment and "Crucify him!" the next. The liturgy invites us to see the gospel story as our story so that we can be present to these events and see why we need conversion.

HOLY THURSDAY

Solemn honor given to the Most Blessed Sacrament and washing human feet! Does it seem strange that these two actions are so closely associated on this day?

Baptism has been the focus of Lent. The final step in Christian Initiation (which includes baptism, confirmation, and Eucharist) is the holy Eucharist—being admitted to table fellowship. On Holy Thursday, the liturgy dramatizes the result of our baptism: we can sit at table with Jesus and the disciples and receive the sign of his everlasting presence among us. And what does that invitation imply? Washing feet. Those who would be baptized into this community must be ready to serve one another. Humble service, willingness to help in the ordinary events of daily life—eating, bathing—these are what baptism means.

But this unique liturgy on Holy Thursday evening is not merely a retelling of the story of the Last Supper or a dramatization of a Seder meal in a new context. Liturgy always does more than recall a past event; it activates that event here and now. In the liturgy, the Church "opens up to the faithful the riches of the Lord's powers and merits, so that these are in some way made present at all times; the faithful lay hold of them and are filled with saving grace" (*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, 102). Through the liturgy, we become present to the event; Jesus speaks to us, now, today.

After the washing of the feet, Jesus turns to us and says: "Do you realize what I have done for you? You call me 'teacher' and 'master,' and rightly so, for indeed I am. If I, therefore, the master and teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash one another's feet. I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do" (John 13:12b–15).

GOOD FRIDAY

Good Friday is the most sober day of the entire Church year. There are no sacraments celebrated on this day. The altar is bare. There are no greetings, genuflections, opening song, or processions. We simply come and prostrate ourselves in humble submission before the word and the cross of Christ.

We hear the account of Christ's passion according to John. This account is different from that we heard on Palm Sunday of the Passion of the Lord. In John's Gospel (written some years after the other three gospels, thus allowing the evangelist more time to reflect on the meaning of the Messiah), Jesus is victorious on the cross: Jesus reigns from the tree. The cross is our glory. The instrument of death is the instrument of salvation. The universe is changed. The world will never be the same again.

Word and symbol: after the gospel has been proclaimed, a large cross is brought forward, and we are invited to approach the cross and ask: *Where am I with death? What has Christ's death done to my death? What part of me has died this Lent? Where in my life has the cross led me to hope?* These are the types of thoughts and emotions that might go through our minds as we approach the cross and reverently touch the wood or even kiss this instrument of torture and death. If we have died with Christ in baptism, we surely shall live with him.

THE EASTER VIGIL

Lent and baptism come together in this holy night. A vigil is a time to wait and watch. We wait with the catechumens and generations of those waiting for Christ to come from the tomb. We sit around the new fire and tell the stories that give meaning to our baptism: creation (life emerges from water), the flood (Noah and his family saved by water), Abraham called to sacrifice Isaac (we must sacrifice all to follow Christ). We hear Paul assure us that if we have died with Christ, we will rise with him. We shout

our Alleluia!—a word that's fresh and new as we haven't used it for these forty days. And with the Alleluia on our lips, we hear the proclamation of the resurrection of Christ—the proclamation of *our* resurrection, not merely an event long ago. And the ritual moment of that resurrection was our baptism (an event that remains active in us *now*) when we rose with Christ to a new life.

As the catechumens come forward, we pray that what happened to Christ might happen to them. We watch as they go down into the tomb with Jesus and emerge dripping wet with new life, are sealed with the chrism of salvation, and are confirmed. The vigil comes to its climax

with the celebration of the Eucharist in which we join the newly baptized and those baptized last year and years ago, and we break our Lenten fast with the new food of the kingdom.

Each Easter, after the catechumens are baptized, the Church turns to us and asks us again: "Do you renounce sin?...Do you believe...?" and, in essence, "Do you wish to renew your baptism?" The answers to these questions are two simple words: "I do." But if we have made baptism the focus of our prayer, fasting, and almsgiving during the forty days of Lent, our "I do" will be more than two little words. In that "I do," we will know that our Lent—our baptismal retreat—has been a success!



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