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The Meaning of Lent

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The Meaning of Lent

Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"For many of us the time of the year has come to participate in the celebration of Lent. For most Catholics, Lent means giving up something they enjoy, doing something good, and not eating meat on Fridays. Some see it as a waste and hate to make the sacrifice. But Lent is a special celebration. Ash Wednesday begins Lent. Ash Wednesday is significant because the placing of ashes on the forehead is a sign of humility before God; a symbol of mourning and sorrow at the death that sin brings into the world. It not only prefigures the mourning at the death of Jesus, but also places the worshipper in a position to realize the consequences of sin. The Sundays during the Lenten season commemorate special events in the life of Our Lord, such as his Transfiguration and his Triumphal Entrance into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, which begins Holy Week. Holy week climaxes with Holy Thursday, on which Christ celebrated the first Mass, Good Friday, on which he was Crucified, and Holy Saturday—the last day of Lent—during which, Our Lord lay in the Tomb before his Resurrection on Easter Sunday, which is the first day after Lent."

The Meaning of Lent

by

Courtney Ren

For many of us the time of the year has come to participate in the celebration of Lent. For most Catholics, Lent means giving up something they enjoy, doing something good, and not eating meat on Fridays. Some see it as a waste and hate to make the sacrifice. But Lent is a special celebration. Ash Wednesday begins Lent. Ash Wednesday is significant because the placing of ashes on the forehead is a sign of humility before God; a symbol of mourning and sorrow at the death that sin brings into the world. It not only prefigures the mourning at the death of Jesus, but also places the worshipper in a position to realize the consequences of sin. The Sundays during the Lenten season commemorate special events in the life of Our Lord, such as his Transfiguration and his Triumphant Entrance into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, which begins Holy Week. Holy week climaxes with Holy Thursday, on which Christ celebrated the first Mass, Good Friday, on which he was Crucified, and Holy Saturday—the last day of Lent—during which, Our Lord lay in the Tomb before his Resurrection on Easter Sunday, which is the first day after Lent.

Lent owes much of its spirit to the forty days Jesus spent in the desert preparing for his ministry. We say he was tempted there, but a more accurate translation may be "tested." In this place, Jesus was offered the opportunity to be the wrong kind of messiah. He rejected each possibility. The defeat of Satan during this testing hinted at the final defeat of evil through the Cross and Resurrection (<http://www.rushman.org/lent1.html>).

Lent is a season of intense prayer, fasting, and concern for those in need. It offers all Christians an opportunity to prepare for Easter by serious discernment about their lives, with particular attention to the word of God, which enlightens the daily journey of all who believe (Catholic.org). This is the season that reminds us of the great sacrifice

that Christ made for each one of us. Centuries ago Jesus Christ went through an agony, a scourging, a crowning and a crucifixion. The tragedy of Good Friday led to the triumph of Easter Sunday. This is why Fridays are days of abstinence. Jesus died for our sins on Friday, making it an especially appropriate day of mourning our by denying ourselves something we enjoy. The acts of self-denial, the acts of sacrifice we make during this season help us identify with the sacrifices of Christ. Lent allows us to unite our sacrifice with that of Christ and our pain with his.

But how does giving up meat on Fridays and sacrificing other worldly possessions that we think we need connect us to Jesus sacrifices and pain? The desert experience is about deprivation. Most of us try our whole life not to be deprived, but when we are, we discover that we are not all-powerful. Doing without can strip away some of the illusions and give us a glimpse of truth. During Lent, we use abstinence from meat and acts of penance as metaphors. In a very small way, they model the rejection of illusions about what we need, who we are, and who God is. In this life, we try to make some progress in discarding our "disordered attachments." At death, we will no longer have a choice. We cannot enter Heaven burdened with a thousand foolish attachments. When we stand in judgment before God, we will have no illusions about our sanctity or goodness. All will be laid bare, and there will be no more hypocrisy, lies, or illusions. It is far better to begin discarding our foolish attachments in this life, and Lent is a good time to begin this work. Lent allows us to get rid of meaningless things that we have become attached to. We learn that worldly possessions are not what are important. In the end it is the person that has to stand before God and be judged, not their possessions. By denying ourselves something we enjoy, we discipline our will so that we are not slaves to our pleasures. By

disciplining the will to refuse pleasures when they are not sinful, a habit is developed, which allows the will to refuse pleasures when they are sinful. There are few better ways to keep our priorities straight, rather than periodically denying ourselves things of lesser priority to show us that they are not necessary and focus our attention on what is necessary (<http://www.cin.org/users/james/files/lent.htm>). We are made in God's image and reducing our desires and needs with the help of grace will help us become more like God. As Father James Moroney stated, "By letting go of the food and pleasures we do not really need, we participate in Christ's self-emptying in becoming man and in dying upon the cross. . . . We too must empty ourselves of the non-essentials, so that we might cling to the only One we truly need, Christ Jesus, and Him crucified" (<http://usccb.org/comm/archives/2002/02-014.htm>).

Therefore, during Lent we should not think that the sacrifices that we are making are useless and unneeded, but instead we should look at these sacrifices as a way to become closer to God. Lent is a special time of year that allows us to place God first and worldly possessions second. It is a time to teach us that God is the most important, and these small sacrifices are nothing compared to the sacrifice that Jesus made. Through Lent we become closer to God, and hopefully, more humble and God-like in our everyday lives.