

Where Do We Go From Here? – Part 18

Lent concludes on the evening of Holy Thursday. With the Mass of the Last Supper, the Sacred Triduum (three days) of the Lord begins. These three sacred days celebrate the self-giving, suffering, death, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. During the celebration of the Easter Vigil on Saturday night, the elect will be baptized, confirmed, and receive communion. The candidates will be received into the church, confirmed, and receive communion. We, the baptized, will renew our baptismal vows with them.

The Easter Vigil begins with the service of light. In most parishes a fire is lit out-of-doors. The tall Paschal candle, symbolic of the Risen Christ, is lit from the flame of the fire. There is then a procession into the Church led by an incense bearer and the minister holding the candle. The "Light of Christ" song is sung during the procession into the darkened Church. Then, people with individual candles come forward to light their candle from the Paschal candle. In a short while, the whole Church glows when everyone's candle is lit.

During the candle lighting/sharing, it is interesting to notice how once a person's candle is lit, he/she scurries to as many people as possible to light their candle. If they see someone off in a corner, they will quickly make their way to them to make sure they are included. If only people would share the Gospel in such a zealous way.

What the elect, candidates, and even we baptized need to realize is that the nature of the Church is missionary. We have been given the great commission and, because of what Jesus has done for us, we should want to share our faith with others. Our faith is a treasure. We are gifted with God's glorious Spirit and a hope of eternal life in Paradise. Who would not want to share this? Evangelization does not mean you have to force people to believe, try to win them over, or handout Gospel tracts on the streets. St. Peter said: "Always be ready to give an account for the hope that is in you, and that with gentleness and reverence." (1 Peter 3:15). Love people and gently tell your story. The rest is up to God.

People are not impressed by bumper stickers, crosses around our necks, and the fact that we go to church. They want fruit. They want gentleness. They want to see you smile. They want to see that your religion works. In Pope Francis' Apostolic Exhortation, *The Joy of the Gospel*, he writes about joy as the foundation of evangelization. Smile, be generous, positive, and kill people with kindness. Those who do not know Christ are like people holding unlit candles. Be enthusiastic and willing to light their candle just like at the Vigil. Be aware to notice the marginalized off in a corner and reach out to them too.

It is such a blessing to see how the small flame of the Easter candle makes an entire Church bright. Although the flame of the Easter candle, lights the candles of hundreds, the original flame is not diminished in the least. This is the multiplication of light. Our faith is the same way. When we share our faith, we are not diminished; rather, our faith grows.

The two seas in Israel are themselves a parable. One is the Sea of Galilee, the other the Dead Sea. The Jordan River enters and exits the Sea of Galilee, flows south, and finally ends up at the Dead Sea, which has no outlet. The Sea of Galilee teems with life. Nothing lives in the Dead Sea. One sea gives and lives. The second sea only receives and dies.

The celebration of Easter is all about giving as well as receiving. We experience the joy of the resurrection when we give through service and helping others. We share our faith. We help others. A flow develops. We give and live.

In our culture, Easter is only one day. But, in the Church, Easter is a fifty day long season of marveling, rejoicing, learning, and sharing the Good News. During this season of new life, we will read from the Acts of the Apostles. We will hear about the outpouring of the Spirit. We will read about the courage of the apostles. We will see the miracles and growth of the early Church. The world was literally "turned upside down." Now we are the Acts of the Apostles in our day and generation. Luke's work, and, the Acts of the Apostles, ended at Chapter 28. Our life and efforts are Acts Chapter 29.

Seasons of Life

During Lent, we have been preparing to be aware of and to receive Easter graces. Jesus' resurrection comes to us in many ways and forms. As we listen to God's Word and celebrate the fifty days, we open our hearts to be susceptible to blessings. This long season culminates in our being refilled at Pentecost. Lent and Easter surges as we hear about God's Spirit being lavished upon us. The Holy Spirit is God, and God's love is poured into our hearts. All our preparations are about receiving God more fully.

Immediately after Pentecost, we enter back into Ordinary Time. This long season will last until Advent. Then we celebrate the Christmas Season before entering back into Ordinary Time. Finally, these observances will give way to yet another Lent. Seasons are rhythmic and cyclic. A Catholic liturgical calendar helps us to identify the various colors of each season, such as purple for Lent and green for Ordinary Time. The interesting thing about the liturgical calendar is that it is circular and portrays the circle of life. Every year we are in a different point in our own individual lifecycle. We will experience each season in a new way. There is a rhythm and connectedness to life. Our seasons are not disjointed but flow together.

Besides religious seasons, we all experience seasons or stages of development. Eric Erickson a developmental psychologist gave labels to the various stages of human development. He notes that early on we learn trust vs. mistrust. There are several other stages, concluding with integrity vs. despair. People who have worked, grown, and accomplished much have a great sense of inner integrity and self-worth. Others who have procrastinated, been afraid, and missed their opportunities will finish their lives in regret and despair. The point of life is to pass through each stage well and grow as we go. When we get to the end of our life, we want to be at peace, glad that we did what we could when we had the opportunity. Hopefully, we will have learned, loved, and realized our potential.

We also have experiential seasons. There are times of suffering, loneliness, and grieving. They also include times of celebration and joy. We are all familiar with what it is to be human. In addition, our spiritual life has several ups and downs, sometimes in the same day. Author Gail Sheehy in her book *Passages* stated that "crisis moments" trigger new seasons. Events like getting married, the birth of a child, a new job, the death of a loved one, a move to a new location, health problems, and even milestone birthdays can all bring about a new season.

Our education is an example of an experiential season. These years are clearly demarcated. Examples are, attending grammar school, high school, college and in some cases postgraduate studies. These are years of growth and learning. Each leads to new relationships and higher learning. Each is a season preparing for what comes next in our lives.

Various seasons of learning will never end. Each season teaches us something new. Our life is one of preparation and learning. You learn when you read, from relationships, and even travel which in and of itself is an education. Life is an ongoing formation.

In the RCIA (Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults) process, baptism leads to mystagogia (to learn about the final period of post-baptismal catechesis) . During the Easter season this is a planned out, well-demarcated season of further growth and learning in the faith. This time also stresses sharing one's faith in Jesus. It is unfortunate, but some dropout of this part of the process because they have obtained their goal: baptism or full incorporation into the church. Baptism or any other sacrament is not the end but a high point in the process. You do not "get through the sacraments" and then quit. Receiving the sacraments are but a high point along the process. There is so much more.

We can look at the sacrament of marriage as an example. When the wedding day comes and the couple exchange vows, this moment is a celebration of all that has come before as well as all that will be. We accentuate the "vow moment" of the wedding day, but in reality it is the before and after that matters most. The couple has gotten to know each other through months and years of relating. They have fallen in love. They have already exclusively committed themselves to each other. The marriage moment is but an expression of this commitment.

The sacrament does not begin and end during the vow ceremony. After the wedding day, the sacrament will be expressed. The husband-and-wife actually minister the sacrament to each other for the rest of their lives. As they are generous, forgive, and support each other, they become Christ for each other. The sacrament continues for years and years until the separation that comes from death.

Similarly, the RCIA process does not end at the Easter Vigil. Like the vow ceremony in a wedding, the celebration of baptism and being received into the church is a high moment. But much has gone on before that moment. The person has come to faith and made a life commitment to Christ. They have developed some sort of a discipleship lifestyle leading to baptism. Following baptism comes a lifetime of learning, growth, and character development. The same is true for us who are members of the church and were baptized as infants.

Even after many years of formal educational training, learning does not end. We listen to life and learn from others. A bumper sticker summarizes the learning process: "The truly educated person never stops going to school." We should all continue to learn, grow, and become "in Christ."

The growth that comes from learning is preparing us for the beatific vision, for meeting God. Lent is a great opportunity, among many, as we pilgrimage through our life. Preparation opens us up and makes us more susceptible and ready to receive God. One day every one of us will stand before God. Because we are prepared, we will draw near to God's Glory and receive love. Having been prepared, our hearts will have been broadened and widened to receive more and more of God's love. We will be filled with all the fullness of God.

Hearts – like minds – are elastic, and proper preparation stretches and broadens our hearts to receive. St. Augustine said: "Hope expands the desire of our hearts to see God face-to-face, and stretches the capacity of our souls to contain more and more of the fullness of God." Instead of having a hardened, closed, selfish heart, through learning, generosity and trusting God, our heart will be soft, virtuous, and wide open. We will have grown and become "in Christ". When we stand before the glorious beatific vision, we will be ready and able to receive bountifully because our hearts will have been purified. We will finally be home.

How to Prepare

Whether in Lent or in other seasons in life, our journey is about preparation. We prepare by:

- Believing in Jesus – believing he died for us personally on the cross. Trust in Jesus in every circumstance and difficulty.
- Developing our relationship with God through prayer, reading, and reflection. Through time we love God more and more.
- Celebrating the sacraments: receiving reconciliation and communion.
- Reaching out to people. Be kind, generous, and forgiving. Make things happen and make a difference.
- Working hard to develop our potential in the areas of giftedness given us by God. We become a person of positivity and passion.
- Hungering for knowledge and living with wonder and thanksgiving.
- Allowing the Holy Spirit to work in us and form us into a person of proven character, virtue, and integrity.
- Being concerned about the quality of our relationships. Invest your life in your family and community. Love people.
- Loving yourself. Avoid sin, self sabotage, and addictions and develop a lifestyle of self-care.
- Living a lifestyle of constant self surrender to God: Kenosis.
- Learning to be content, have peace, and enjoy your life. Celebrate your successes.

If anyone has ever taken an art appreciation class in college, you learn many new things about an area – art – that you may be lacking in. Unlike most courses, there are no periodic exams. The entire grade is dependent on the one and only final exam. The exam is cumulative and incorporates everything you have been learning during the entire course semester. The final exam would come down to this: You would have to view a piece of art and appraise it. To evaluate the work of art correctly you would have to employ the skills that you would have learned during the course. If you tried to cut corners and did not learn about specific periods, or artists, or techniques, your lack of knowledge would be easily displayed.

Because many who take the course do not know what work of art (from which period, style, or artist) you would view, you would have to pay attention, study, and learn all the various aspects during the course. You would have to prepare yourself by doing the necessary work. You study the different periods, styles, and artists. This helps you to grow in your understanding as to how to appraise different artistic works. You can not cut corners and expect a good grade. When the final exam is given, the one who answers well and receives a good grade is the one who has prepared and is ready for the exam.

There are no cutting corners in life. We must believe, do the work, acquire the virtue, and become the person God wants us to be. The final is coming. We must be prepared and ready. In fact, we know the answer to the final. We just need to work on it now. Here is the answer Jesus gives us:

"Whatever you did for these, the least of my brothers and sisters, you did it for me." (Matthew 25:40). This is the criteria of our judgment. Now is the time to prepare. First, we believe what Jesus taught. Then we proactively love people in practical ways. It is not so much correct "answers" to questions that God will be looking for at the final exam, but who you became and how you treated people.

The journey of Lent, as the journey of life itself, is a process of growth and formation, of ongoing purification and enlightenment. We never really "arrive," but we are always pressing forward and "becoming." Life is capturing the momentum and continuing to progress. It is about progression, not perfection.

Through our heartfelt prayers, when the time comes for us to be summoned before the Father, we will be ready because of our growth in the sum of our Lents and the seasons of our lives.

The preparation of Lent for Easter is but a facsimile of the whole context of our pilgrimage. Lent prepares us for Easter. Life prepares us for eternity. As Paul wrote: "This light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison." (2 Corinthians 4:17).

Remember that as much as we must try, work, and be proactive, Lent is a season of grace. We do not so much need resolution as revolution. Our efforts are but a cooperation with the grace at work in us.

Jesus went to heaven to prepare a place for us, and the Holy Spirit prepares us for this place. In the beginning of Lent, the Spirit was moving and even thrusting Jesus into the desert. It is the role of the Holy Spirit to move us and make us holy. God does not leave us alone to flounder. He does not demand change and put hard things upon us. His commands are not burdensome. God empowers us, graces us, and makes our becoming the image of Jesus (our life's purpose) possible. The goal of Lent and of life is purification and enlightenment. It is the Holy Spirit who accomplishes this great work of God in us with our surrender and cooperation.

As you invite the Holy Spirit to take control, may this be your best, most significant Lent ever. Pray: "Lord, lead me, guide me, control me."

"I am sure that God who began a good work in you will bring it to completion on the day of Jesus Christ" (Philippians 1:6).

