

Catholic

UPDATE

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LENT: A 40-DAY RETREAT

REDISCOVERING YOUR BAPTISMAL CALL

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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 I hear most often are penance, purple, fish, ashes, fasting, sacrifice, no movies, and no candy. These are all good answers, but I’ve found the best answer to be “baptism.” I am convinced that 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.

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For those of us 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.

Once, years ago, I saw Niagara Falls. It was a wonderful experience, but it didn't change the rest of my life. Once, years ago, I was ordained a priest. That experience has changed the rest of my life. There are events that do change our lives: Carol's marriage, Kathy's becoming a mother, my ordination, your 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 of us who were baptized as children, Lent is a good time to recall and reflect upon what our parents and godparents promised for us.

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 *Rite 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

believe in the Gospel."