

Lent has an interesting history. It seems to have begun as the period of the final preparing of catechumens for baptism. That's why we have things like the Scrutinies on Lenten Sundays. Later, Lent also became the period when the "order of penitents," the already baptized who had fallen into serious sin, prepared to be re-admitted into the Church. Eventually, it became an annual observance for the whole Church.

Then and now, Lent has had at its core idea, conversion. The turning away from sin and turning towards God.

Lent suggests to us a growing insight into the fact that *conversion from sin* is not the victory over one moment of temptation, but the pilgrimage of a lifetime. Unless we keep *becoming* a Christian, we cannot *be* a Christian. As any athlete can tell you, to no longer strive to be *better*, is no longer to be *good*.

This principle of continual becoming, of constant conversion holds throughout the year, of course. But the Church devotes a special season to conversion precisely because of the richness of the Christian mystery.

Compared to all other religions, there is something different about the Christian attitude toward conversion and its practices. Christians don't convert themselves. They may introduce Christ to others, but they convert no one. Conversion happens, not by our efforts, but by Christ's life within us.

Our Lenten practices only dispose us to receive Christ's life; they do not produce it automatically. If we could produce holiness as we can produce muscle-tone by lifting weights, if we could simply sculpt ourselves into great-souled persons, Christianity would have no purpose, Jesus would never have had to come to live among us, and He certainly would not have to die. But we cannot, by ourselves, save ourselves.

Humanity is constantly in the grip of that original sin of Adam and Eve - that they themselves wanted to be God. We tend to elevate ourselves, our wants, our ideas above all else. We take for ourselves the prerogative of God, to determine what is ultimately good and evil. To objectify truth so that we might replace it with our own desires.

This is the meaning of Original Sin, which St. Paul describes in the Letter to the Romans: *Through the disobedience of one man all were made sinners ...* From his own spiritual struggles, St. Paul knows that there is a depth of sin that we did not **opt into** (*all were made sinners...* by the fall of Adam and Eve).

Conversely, there's a depth of sin we cannot **opt out** of. In day to day terms, this means that even our best actions are touched by our self-seeking. Any effort to do good from our own motivation will always end in self-congratulation, self-elevation, self-praise. It is the sin of me, myself and I - of vain-glory. All sin flows out of this wound like an infection, poisoning ourselves and endangering others.

This is why it's not enough to be spiritual-but-not-religious. Not enough to be a nice guy. These things rely on the sufficiency of self.

No, the wound of this sin needs a cure that goes as deep as the wound. We need, as St. Paul says, *through the obedience of one man, to be made righteous.* We need Christ.

And we need Lent and their Holy practices, Christian fasting, Christian almsgiving, and Christian prayer. Why do I identify them as Christian? Because their power to change, to improve, to make a difference in our lives and the lives of others is connected to Christ Jesus.

We do these practices because Christ himself went before us doing these things; He filled these practices with His own power.

We read today that in the desert, Christ himself **fasted**, underwent trial, and overthrew Satan. It is only because He did that, that our own fasting can now claim a share in His victory. Otherwise it is dieting.

We read today that Christ became hungry and vulnerable, that He himself accepted the ministry of angels. When we **give alms**, then, we aim at more than exercising awareness; when we give comfort to the poor, the hopeless, we give to comfort Christ.

We read today that Christ was led in the Spirit to pray to the Father. **Prayer** has been filled with His power and His presence. Here at the Eucharist, we enter into Christ's perfect prayer in such a way that also becomes our prayer.

Christ's life, not overpowering but empowering, not obliterating but changing and becoming our life—this is the meaning of conversion—this is the reason for Lent.