

Sooooo, here we are at the third Sunday of Lent... how are we doing with our Lenten resolutions?

Personally, I've had a couple of slip-ups, and it always seems like Fridays are the only days I really crave a big plate of spaghetti and meatballs or a double cheeseburger. I shouldn't be surprised at all about that, because I am re-training long-time habits and trying to form new - hopefully better ones.

That's what we Catholics do during this special time of Grace... Lent, for us, has become a time of looking inward and working toward renewal of heart, mind, and soul. It's a good thing.

But in the early days of the Church, Lent was not so much a time for Catholics to focus inward, but rather to focus outward.

By the early days of the Church Fathers, the whole Church was practicing the virtues of Lent, prayer, fasting, and almsgiving.

But we did this primarily for the sake of new Catholics to be baptized and penitent Catholics to be readmitted to communion... at Easter. These were the people for whom Lenten practices were an inward examination.

Today, it is impossible to gauge how many people return to the Church after being away because they may return at any time, instead of just Easter.

But those converting and those adults coming into the Catholic fold at the Easter Vigil, in the United States alone, have been over 100,000 per year for the last ten years or so, with a couple of spikes of around 150,000.

A statistic released in 2016 tells us that the world's population of Catholics grew at a rate higher than the rate of the population of the whole world. So, more people were becoming Catholic than were being born.

Yet, we are still experiencing a sharp downturn in the number of Catholics who regularly attend Mass, especially in the United States and Europe.

So, at least on the statistical front, we have some great news and some concerning news. So what should we do?

It seems we ought to recover the ancient tradition and do penance for and with those who will enter the Church at Easter as-well-as those returning throughout the year. To pray and fast, not only for ourselves, but consciously for those who will be Baptised, or in our case, the Elect, those baptized to be Confirmed and receive their first Communion in a few short weeks.

(short pause)

Two Sundays ago, I watched as over a hundred people seeking baptism and full communion with the Church were accepted by our Bishop in the Rite of Election at the Cathedral in Grand Island.

Our parishes have people who were received, and they need our prayers and support. Is that something we could commit to doing as individuals and as a faith community? I hope that it is.

(Divider Point)

All of Heaven rejoices when even one sinner comes to the Lord. Heaven must be beyond joyous at the Easter Vigil!

But what about those of us who are still awaiting Heaven?

Hopefully, this season has prepared our hearts so that we, too, may rejoice abundantly at the Resurrection.

But there is something else that we need to do.

There are still millions who should be returning to or entering into Christ's Church. We need to meet these souls at their wells. We need to tell them about Jesus. We need to evangelize.

To evangelize is not just a task undertaken from time to time; or even most of the time. It is, to put it simply, a part of the Church's defining identity; it is, in many ways, what she exists for. Pope Saint John Paul II said, "No believer in Christ, no institution of the Church, can avoid this supreme duty: to proclaim Christ to all peoples."

That doesn't mean it will always be easy, but Christ shows us today that it doesn't have to be as difficult as we sometimes want to make it.

Jesus comes to a town where everyone is a member of what a good Jew recognizes as a heretical sect. Jews would travel miles out of their way just to avoid walking into Samaritan territory. But not Jesus. He heads through Samaria, and He sits down by a well. A woman comes to draw water.

Jesus recognizes, he "sees" her and affirms her by being willing to just sit with her and talk.

The conversation starts out on the subjects of water, wells, Jews, and Samaritans.

But the dialogue eventually leads her to admit her deepest need. As thirsty as Jesus was for a cup of water, she thirsts for love and has run through quite a few partners looking for the real thing.

She sees in Jesus that His is the love she's been looking for. It's not carnal. It's a love in Spirit and in Truth.

She abandons her water jar, and symbolically, along with it, all of her past, and she runs to town to tell everyone about Jesus.

Did she wait until she had a master's degree in theology? Did she sit down with the people and demonstrate from Scripture why Jesus was the Messiah?

No. She simply told people, with joy, confidence, and conviction, what Jesus had done for her.

And she invited people to come and experience him for themselves.

And for over two millennia, that's how most new Christians came to believe.

Christians simply listened to neighbors and co-workers, even strangers with interest, respect, and love. They genuinely cared about their needs and told them how Jesus had met similar needs in their lives.

And then an invitation was given to come and see for themselves.

In addition to praying and fasting for our Elect, those seeking full communion, one of our more meaningful Lenten resolutions, might be to pray and work toward getting over our fear or hesitation of sharing the good news, to be aware of the spiritual and physical needs of those around us, to joyfully share Our Lord's love, to share, as St. Paul says today, "the hope that does not disappoint."