



Lent: The Church's Retreat Time

Since Vatican II we have been reclaiming the “baptismal character and spirituality” of the Season of Lent. In its beginnings, Lent was a “retreat time” for the catechumens and those wishing to make a profession of faith in the Church. This “retreat time” was a time of prayer and preparation for their initiation into the Church and their reception of the Sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist on Holy Saturday evening. The whole Church was invited to make this a time of retreat also as they accompanied the catechumens and those making a profession of faith toward Holy Saturday. This season of Lent was then focused on our renewal together in our baptismal identity in Jesus the Christ.

There was also another development in the understanding of Lent as those who would enter the order of penitents (for those repenting of serious sins) would also do penance and strive to reclaim their baptismal innocence in Christ during Lent. Unfortunately with the decline of the catechumenate (RCIA) in our history, the penitential spirit of this season became the dominant spirituality in our Lenten practices and liturgies over time.

The bishops at Vatican II acknowledged these two strands in our understanding of Lent, but they encouraged a reclaiming of the “baptismal spirituality” at the heart of this season [see the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*), paragraphs 109, 138]. This renewal of our understanding of Lent calls us to affirm who we are and who we are called to become in Christ. Even when we acknowledge our sins and our desire to change (the meaning of the word “penance”), we are invited to do so in light of the positive spirituality of affirming and reclaiming our identity and discipleship as followers of Christ. This emphasis on our positive calling as “Christians” opens us more fully to the grace of God which empowers us to let go of our sins and put into practice the positive actions of the spiritual and corporal works of mercy. This is the joy to be found in this wondrous “retreat season” of Lent.

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