

Lent calls us to be a community of believers

CCP USER / 27 FEBRUARY 2017 / HITS: 26

JOURNEY TOWARD HOLINESS

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Not long ago I saw the movie “Hidden Figures.” Besides the main storyline in this film about the men and women working for NASA to put our man on the moon, a noteworthy subtext was the sense of community and purpose the characters all had.

Everyone from the policeman, who put his racial bias aside to escort the black women to work at NASA, to pedestrians watching the launch on TV from sidewalks outside

store fronts, to the engineers who to a person called wives to inform them that overtime was required without pay to get the project done – everyone was caught up in the urgency of the project and its importance in the space race with the Russians.

It made me think about Church and about Lent.

Sometimes I wonder whether our Catholic Church will make it through this century. The greatest danger to it comes from individualism, and its companion, privatism, for which we U.S. people are famous. The sense we have of being a people together, of belonging to a faith community so much so that I cannot think of myself apart from it, has been seriously eroded over the last 50 years or so.

This is not just a church problem, of course. Social scientists have noted the collapse of unitive collective consciousness in civic discourse, the disappearance of many associations which used to flourish in our country, the lessening ability of people to make commitments beyond self interest. This sense of togetherness is that special thing that the people in “Hidden Figures” had but we don’t have much of anymore.

Lent invites us back to a sense of community. Ash Wednesday’s first reading (Joel 2: 12-18) is emblematic of the purpose of Lent. “Blow the trumpet ... proclaim a fast; call the assembly, gather the people ...” This reading is a powerful call to fasting, but it is not a call asking us as individuals to fast. It is a call to us as a people to fast. The practices of fasting and abstinence used to have more material elements that created the sense of a community engaging together in a spiritual practice. Fasting was quite severe, much more than eating only the equivalent of two full meals a day. Before Lent began, all fat and eggs had to be used up — hence the practice of fried foods like donuts for Mardi Gras. Lent food was vegetables and grains and perhaps dried fish — not fish at \$7.00 plus a pound. The severity of Lent

made finishing the Lent season a wonderful celebrative contrast!

The Church still invites us to see fasting and abstinence as communal practices. It invites us to see these actions, and other common Lent practices like communal penance services, as symbolic actions of solidarity with the world Church and as expressions of our resolve as a Church to be more attentive to the poor. These symbolic Lenten actions are signs that our Catholic community is willing to be made a more holy community by facing our shortcomings, by praying together more during these weeks, by becoming more dedicated to our own common project.

Unfortunately, the communal aspect of our Lenten practices passes many of us by because our catechetical instruction has focused almost exclusively on private sinfulness and repentance for personal sin during Lent. Only relatively recently have we begun to teach our children that our understanding of goodness, truth, and beauty is grounded in our faith community, and that the evil we do and the good we fail to do as individuals impacts not only us but our social network and our discipleship community.

Parish staffs, on which I served for many years, do sometimes ask, “how does this community need to grow in order better to be the light of the world?” Then programmatic elements are developed — perhaps a speaker, a parish mission, a special fundraising project ... Parish councils also evaluate parish vitality to shape into parish goals. Wouldn’t it be wonderful if the people themselves were able to answer these kinds of questions, perhaps during a dialogue homily, so that they could affirm what the parish community needs spiritually and help shape a common Lenten journey of action and prayer?

Well most of us can’t make that happen. But we could ask that question, how can we grow together spiritually this Lent? Within our natural communities — within couples, families, small faith communities, bible study groups, associations like K of C, classes of learners. Consider replacing private Lent resolutions or actions with shared resolutions or actions this Lent, things that not only help me but connect me with others in our Lent journey together. For the insight of that Ash Wednesday scripture is that the call to holiness through repentance is given to us in and through the people the Lord has brought together.

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