

Lent 2004

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Different times of year offer me, as your pastor, the opportunity to reflect with you upon the climate in which we live and the liturgical season which we celebrate. Lent offers just such an opportunity. It is in this pastoral spirit in which I offer to and share with you some reflections for us, the parish family of the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

In Our Holy Father's message for this Lent, he offers us a starting point for our reflection:

The evocative rite of the imposition of ashes marks the beginning of the holy season of Lent, when the Liturgy once more calls the faithful to radical conversion and trust in God's mercy. This year's theme -- "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me" (Matthew 18:5) -- invites us to reflect on the condition of children. Today Jesus continues to call them to himself and to set them as an example to all those who wish to be his disciples. Jesus' words call upon us to see how children are treated in our families, in civil society, and in the Church. They are also an incentive to rediscover the simplicity and trust which believers must cultivate in imitation of the Son of God, who shared the lot of the little ones and the poor (1).

As our own parish experiences what one might call a 2nd childhood and time of growth and renewal, it is an appropriate time for us to hear our Holy Father's words and to spend some time reflecting upon our own youth as well as the renewed vitality and youthful outlook of our parish.

Reflecting upon my own youth, there are several things that immediately come to mind. First would be the simplicity of my childhood. There were no daily crises with which to deal. There were no late bill payments. There were no complicated interpersonal relationships. There was just living each day as it came and an absolute trust and dependence upon my parents, teachers, and those in authority over me to provide for me all the things I truly needed (and only those things which were for my ultimate well-being). I remember the daily joy of living - of allowing each day to unfold for me and to discover something new each day. I remember the daily pleasures of life (a surprise trip for ice cream, a delicious home-cooked meal as our family gathered for dinner, the tender embrace of mom when I wasn't feeling well). I recall how life was lived without much planning, but with pure spontaneity - allowing each moment and event to unfold before me with all its potential and possibilities. I recall how important my faith was for me as my family gathered frequently for prayer and attended Mass together weekly. I recall the wonder I felt as the priest held up the consecrated host, after praying, "This is my Body, given for you." I remember asking myself questions and thinking about what heaven would be like, about why some people suffered, about how God loved me so much the he would die on a cross for me.

Are these qualities of simplicity, joy of life, spontaneity, and faith filled with wonder something we as adults or as a parish have lost - yet something we truly desire to possess once again? Lent offers us the time to strive to recapture these "child-like" attitudes - especially when it comes to our faith, our family and the larger and global faith community.

Recapturing these qualities causes us to want to open our arms to one another in familial love and respect, just as Jesus reached out during His life and called others to follow His example: "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me" (Matthew 18:5). As a parish, we have begun a wonderful time of renewal and "re-birth" in our parish - and the possibilities that lie before us are *so* exciting. But we need

every member of our family to take an active part. It is only working together, in simplicity, with excitement and hope, that our possibilities for new life and growth will bear fruit.

Our Holy Father reminds us that “‘To become’ one of the least and ‘to receive’ the little ones...are two aspects of a single teaching which the Lord repeats to his disciples in our time. Only the one who makes himself one of the ‘least’ is able to receive with love the ‘least’ of our brothers and sisters (2).

I believe that our parish experience and reflection upon our “new” tithing program enables us to capture both of these ideas at the same time. To trust in another unconditionally and with total faith (as tithing calls us to do) and at the same moment (knowing that our parish tithes as well) to reach out and to extend our helping hand toward the poor, our youth, the suffering and struggling, those who have given up everything to follow the Lord.

In this season of Lent, we prepare to once again celebrate the saving mysteries of our God, which call us both to become childlike in our dependence upon Him for salvation and grace and also to look out for the needs and wellbeing, not only of our own parish family, but also of our brothers and sisters locally and throughout the world. It is only the light of Christ’s Paschal Mystery that illumines our lives and gives us hope for going on, even when facing the most complex and painful of situations. “Holy Week will again set before us this mystery of salvation in the evocative rites of the Easter Triduum” (4).

My dear brothers and sisters, heeding the words of our Holy Father, “let us set out with trust on our Lenten journey, sustained by fervent prayer, penance and concern for those in need. In particular, may this Lent be a time of ever greater concern for the needs of children, in our own families and in society as a whole: for they are the future of humanity.”

With childlike simplicity let us turn to God and call him, as Jesus taught us in the prayer of the “Our Father,” “Abba,” “Father.” “ Let us repeat this prayer often during Lent; let us repeat it with deep emotion. By calling God ‘Our Father,’ we will better realize that we are his children and feel that we are brothers and sisters of one another. Thus it will be easier for us to open our hearts to the little ones, following the invitation of Jesus: ‘Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me’” (Matthew 18:5) (5).

I invite you to be renewed in Christ’s hopeful message of mission and renewal by participating fully in the Lenten events the parish has planned. I certainly recognize the great time commitment of attendance at church-sponsored functions. Yet, if this message of hope and joy speaks to our hearts (as hope and truth always do), then we will be willing to make the sacrifices necessary to be renewed and strengthened during this Season of Lent by taking an even more active role in the building up of our parish.

To aid you in following the Lenten schedule, I have enclosed in this mailing a parish “Lenten Calendar of Events” which lists, not only the things which happen regularly, but also many special activities and opportunities for us to grow in love for God and one another.

Be assured of Fr. Bernard and my prayers for you. May our glorious Savior lead you deeper into the great mystery of Himself and allow you to share more fully in His life and His mission.

Your shepherd, and one of God’s sheep,

Rev. John Bateman