

Return to the Father this Lent  
By Bishop Milan Lach, SJ

When children are small, they fear losing their parents. To be separated from their parents, even for a few moments, can make children feel lost and cry. But, once they are reunited with their parents, their fear is calmed and their joy returns. Great Lent, this period the church gives us to prepare for Easter, is a time for us to return to God, our Eternal Father, and to feel the joy of being reunited with him. Lent provides the way for this journey.

Prior to Lent, we heard in the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Lk 15: 11-32) about the loving kindness of the Father. It offers an image of God who waits patiently and without judgment for us, his lost children. We must learn from this parable to cast aside false images of God. He is not a policeman, an authority, or someone to fear. He is our Father and, with all of our sins and our debts, he still loves us.

Just as the parable describes God as a loving Father, we must likewise understand ourselves as the prodigal son. We live in a society where there is no question of sin; everyone is encouraged to enjoy life and live in the moment. We are all okay. We live in freedom and we can do anything. But this is not true. God gave us the Ten Commandments as rules for a good life, to preserve our happiness.

Through this parable, Jesus teaches that everybody has a chance to change their lives for the better and to return to the Father. No one is excluded; this offer is valid even for those who do not attend church, for our Heavenly Father truly loves us all.

Our Lenten services offer to us the possibility to listen to liturgical texts and the Word of God. To these prayer services, we also add fasting. This is not a special diet. It is a time of abstinence. We must let our bodies feel the absence of food, for this creates a space to be more open to God and to our brothers and sisters and to give alms.

It is also necessary to stop the busyness and to create space and time for God and for prayer. I encourage you to attend the Lenten weekday church services, not only Sunday liturgies. We need our Lenten prayer to gain a deeper sense that God loves us all.

I invite you to have hope on our Lenten journey, to embrace the possibility to change our lives, by admitting that we are lost and finding our way back to the Father. A concrete step in this journey is to receive the sacrament of reconciliation. Now is the time for a good confession; we cannot make this return to the Father without one. So please do not hesitate.

Our priests are here for you, to listen to your confessions and to give you the sacrament. Do not worry. Do not be afraid. Take advantage of this gift of forgiveness. Come back to the Father. He is waiting patiently and he is ready to accept each and every one of us into his loving embrace.

*As published in Horizons, Feb. 11, 2018.  
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