

Abide in Christ

Easter: A 90 Day Celebration



Archbishop John C. Wester

As we prayerfully reflect on the readings of Ash Wednesday this year, we notice what, at first blush, seem to be some interesting contradictions. For example, we hear that Ash Wednesday is an acceptable time, and that it is a day of salvation. And later on in the Mass of the day, the Preface refers to Lent as a “joyful” season. Well, these consoling and joyful themes seem to contradict the ashes that are placed on our foreheads, the purple vestments, the omission of the Gloria and the Alleluia and the penance that we are called to perform throughout these forty days and nights of Lent.

So, what gives? Why the contradiction?

The heart of the matter is this: Truly this is an acceptable time. This is the day of salvation. This is a joyful season. We are beginning not just the Lenten retreat, but we are beginning what I like to say is 90 days of Easter celebration. So we have 40 days of Lent and 50 days of Easter – a 90-day celebration. You might look upon Easter, as I like to say every year, as a diamond. And a diamond has facets; it has little faces on it. Every facet is an aspect of the one diamond. Easter is the diamond. Beginning on Ash Wednesday and ending on Pentecost Sunday, we celebrate different facets of this central mystery of our faith: Christ’s resurrection. The first of these facets is Ash Wednesday and the beginning of Lent, followed by Passion (Palm) Sunday, Holy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday, Easter, the Ascension, and Pentecost. All of these are celebrations of the great feast of Easter. What we are celebrating is Easter, and that’s why it’s joyful, because this is our salvation. This is eternal life. Jesus died for us and rose again on the third day, and so our celebration is one of Easter joy.

Now, this is not to say that we don’t look at the facet of Lent and realize that part of Easter is the cross; that Jesus died for us, that we get to Easter through the cross. You and I get to the Easter celebration through our

crosses. That’s why we have the penitential part. The Gospel of Ash Wednesday emphasizes three ways of carrying our cross throughout Lent: prayer, almsgiving and fasting.

We pray as a sign of our dependency on God. I say, “God, I am just a simple human being, filled with sin and imperfection. I need you, Lord. I come into Your holy presence and I bow to You and I adore You.” This is the penitence part, because I like to be the head of everything. I like to be the center of attention. So it’s difficult for me to say, “Lord, I adore You. Not me. You.” That’s where the cross comes in. In my prayer, I have to do penance, I have to remind myself of my humility, my neediness, my dependency.

And I give alms not because I think I’m so good, but because I’m poor. I give alms to remind myself of my own poverty; I’m just giving to one of my own – to my fellow sister or brother who is poor with me. Again, that’s difficult. That’s a cross to bear, to acknowledge my poverty.

And I fast, or do good works, as a sign of my own neediness, my hunger and my thirst for God.

So, anything that I do should direct me to the cross, not to me. If I give up candy for Lent, I do it not to say, “Oh, look how good I am. I gave up Hershey bars.” I do it as

a reminder that I hunger for the living God, and it points me to the crucifix.

If I'm going to give up candy, and it's going to make me feel proud and really good about myself, then I should not do it. Rather, I should eat all the candy I want, and maybe the stomachache will remind me of the cross! And that would be a good thing, because it's the cross that will lead me to Easter. For, when I join my sufferings to those of Christ and live out my baptismal call to be one with Christ in His sufferings, then I will also be one with Christ who reigns now at the right hand of the Father in Heaven. My sufferings will draw me closer to the living Lord with whom I will be one forever in Heaven. My sufferings open up a place within me for Christ to fill with His grace, a grace that leads to everlasting life.

No matter what it is that we do, we do it because of God's grace, because God is working in us, moving us with His Son through the cross to Easter. Lent is a time to look at the cross because we can only get to Easter through the cross. These past months, our Catholic Church has been carrying the heavy cross of clergy sexual abuse and in many cases her poor handling of this matter. And yet it is only by carrying this cross with Christ that the Church will be healed and given new life through the Resurrection even as she seeks to heal those who have been harmed in any way. My prayer for our archdiocese this year is that we will carry our crosses throughout Lent in such a way that we all meet at the altar of the Lord this Easter to celebrate the gift of eternal life won for us by Christ, whose cross is the gateway to heaven!

Sincerely yours in the Risen Lord

+ John C. Wester

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