

Dear CLC members,

Do you, like many, see February as a rather dull and dreary month to move through as quickly as possible like a sort of mid-winter traffic bump that, once behind us, allows acceleration towards spring time? Is it our imagination that the weather appears to support our muted enthusiasm for this time of year; the winds seem stronger; the snow deeper, the cold more penetrating and the sun shines less often? To those of us less enthused about this “half-way-through-winter” time, February seems to be a fitting prelude for the 40 days of Lent.

Interestingly, one source suggests that the word *lent* has its roots in the Anglo-Saxon word *lencten* which means spring. The entire spring season was called *Lenctentid* (a time of *lengthening and flowering*) which somehow puts a new “composition of place” in mind for me. Never the less, regardless of where we are or how we are, on February 3rd our 2016 Lenten journey began. The invitation always extended is to dispose ourselves to enter into a liturgical period of quiet introspection...not on things dreary and dark but on the “*lengthening and flowering*” of our true selves as beheld in the beloved gaze of the Trinity.

It is with this grace of knowing I am precious in God’s eyes that draws me into silent reflection, of taking stock, of soul-searching that inevitably leads to a desire for reparation and conversion.

I have to admit that when I sat recalling my childhood memories of this season, the picture was not quite so altruistic. As a Catholic student, Lent was a rather somber time of penance and more penance. Attendance at daily morning Mass, Friday evening’s Way of the Cross, daily recitation of the rosary, frequent “confession”, giving up stuff like gum and eating chocolate was my typical Lenten rhythm year after year. In truth, giving up chocolate was not a huge sacrifice for me but it seemed to be for all my friends and, in keeping with the herd mentality, I willingly joined the boycott.

Recently, I happened upon an article that coincided with my experience of Lent.

“About halfway through Lent, a parent checked in on how the children were doing with their Lenten commitments. The young son had promised to give up fighting with his brothers and sisters during Lent. When he was asked how it was going, the boy replied, “I’m doing pretty good, but boy, I can’t wait until Easter!”

For years, I, too, saw Lent primarily as a time of commitment to self- imposed penances (giving up) that was suppose to somehow have a bearing on the Easter event... just how, I wasn’t quite sure. There was a secret calendar in my mind, though, that I checked off the week days until “respite Sundays”. Mind you, every week that I kept to my commitments meant a gold star on the classroom chart. My best friend Millie usually ended up with the most stars...but her mother was really religious and daily Mass was a household must (my mom was not so insistent). It was a time that, all Catholics “endured” to varying degrees of intensity, a way of proceeding that shaped understanding and practise of Lent that stayed with me well into adulthood.

Reflecting back, and writing this article, I see the changes in my attitude and understanding over the years more clearly...not so focused now on “enduring” and “giving up” but of “taking on” and “being with”. In the midst of my reflection, I became aware of a hidden technique that I instinctively used, and still use, for my defence and self interest...an escape clause! Back in my younger years, giving up an

occasional taste of chocolate candy absolved me of even contemplating giving up my absolute favourite soda drink...an escape clause. Sundays, everyone knew, was not technically a Lenten day so you could indulge in all the “give-ups” so I chewed my bubble-gum from morning until bedtime and even managed to eat a goodly supply of chocolate in between times, as befitting an escape clause condition. Even Millie’s mom was the escape clause that was used to justify my occasional lack of incentive to face the cold 7:00 am walk to morning Mass. This heightened my awareness of a previously unexamined trait has led to seeing, with clearer vision, my own peculiarities in sidestepping those things that are too troublesome, too demanding or just plain involved too much effort to deal with. This has also led me to a keener awareness of similarities in today’s society – how the “escape clause” is used to keep from really seeing, hearing, or doing.

Back to the speed bump! It strikes me that it might prove interesting to imagine the whole of February (and March) as a speed bump reminding us to slow down and take time to ponder. Lent is about change (conversion); it is about moving from side shows to the main event of growing and flowering. Moving from petty jealousies, worries about small things (much of which we really can’t control), from fears and anxiety and the sundry other things (that distract us from the point of it all) to beholding Jesus’ incredible love and self sacrifice. Lent is the time to focus thoughts and actions on the invitation to change whatever needs to change that impedes growth. The goal of this growth is to become more like Jesus. Pope Francis suggested in a 2015 Lenten message that we pray to receive a Jesus-like heart which is not closed off, indifferent or prey to the globalization of indifference.

Father Pedro Arrupe SJ wrote in his 1975 book (*A Planet to Heal*), “*Conversion is not a giving away of something that we can well afford to lose. It goes much deeper than that. It is a putting away of something that we are: our old self, with its all-too-human, all-to-worldly prejudices, convictions, attitudes, values, ways of thinking and acting; habits, which have become so much a part of us that it is agony even to think of parting with them, and yet which are precisely what prevents us from rightly interpreting the signs of the times from seeing life steadily and seeing life whole.*”

Lent is a time of profound grace and all are invited to let that grace sink in, take root and change us so that we may come to understand and experience more powerfully the Love of God who embraces all of who we are. Love transforms.

Pope Francis wrote, “With Christ - joy is constantly born anew”. This Lent, through our prayer, penance and sharing, let us CLC members proclaim that we are indeed ambassadors of this joyful Christ. In this way, we will enter more deeply into His joy so that this same joy may enter more deeply into our lives. So, rather than the initiation of a time of endurance, the month of February presents itself as an opportunity to begin to image, delight and smell change in the air.

May the Spirit continue to guide us on this Lenten journey,

Leah Michaud