

March 14, 2021 | Fourth Sunday in Lent: <https://bible.usccb.org/bible/readings/030721-YearB.cfm>

2 Chr 36:14-16, 19-23
Psalm 137:1-2, 3, 4-5, 6
Eph 2:4-10
Jn 3:14-21

By Fr. Francis Gargani, CSSR

In my humble opinion, Lent still hasn't become the Season of "rebirth and renewal" envisioned by the Second Vatican Council and the following years of challenging liturgical reform, especially the promulgation of the great "Rite of Catechumenal Initiation for Adults," soon known as the RCIA.

Lent was born in the early church's development of the liturgical calendar to be the season to accompany catechumens in their final stage of catechetical formation that climaxes at the great Easter Vigil. The whole Church readied itself through various practices that evolved into the easy-to-remember tripod of prayer, fasting and almsgiving, to shine ever more intensely as the sacramental encounter of the Body of Christ.

The now common RCIA program was envisioned as a catechumenal revolution that would involve the entire parish, especially engaging the family of faith to get excited at the prospect of welcoming new members. Lent was key to the program as the Community would witness at its Sunday main Liturgies "the scrutinies" of the catechumens and accompany them as they move closer and closer to the great Resurrection Ritual of Baptism. The dream was that the RCIA Program would change the whole focus and thrust of Lent from the individual to the communal.

Personal growth and on-going conversion were still fundamental but would be the fruit of the entire Community's effort to live ever more faithfully their mission to be ambassadors of Christ's reconciliation. The Community, because of its Lenten program of renewal, having scraped off any "barnacles" it gathered on its ship, would be at its very best, in other words, for the sake of the catechumens, ready to rejoice and echo anew its Baptismal/Confirmation consecration along with the new-born Christ Disciples!

Imagine if the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops would invite the American Catholic Church for the Lenten Season to address its sin of racism, not only of the past, but to pray and reflect how white privilege operates in our Christian lives now, to give one example of what a "Communal Lenten Program of Renewal" would look like. What a response that would be, not only to the "Black Lives Matter" movement calling us to national consciousness of racism, but to the prophetic challenge of this weekend's First Reading from the second book of Chronicles!

It is clear Chronicles addresses the infidelity of the People of Israel, the Community that is covenanted to the God of Sarah and Abraham, Rachel and Isaac. And their redemption comes

from the most unlikely of peoples, the “pagan” and un-likely savior, Cyrus, king of Persia (modern-day Iran).

Imagine if there was a national media program that would stream into every parish center and, from there, to every parish home. There could be presentations from a variety of theologians and presenters on every facet of racism in our nation, but especially how it is evident in our Church.

There could be powerful Lenten prayer services that would cry out with the laments of our scriptural ancestors echoed in contemporary laments of our nation’s “original sin.” The words of Christ in today’s Gospel would fill our communal penance services: “Everyone who practices evil hates the light; they do not come near it for fear their deeds will be exposed. But they who act in truth come into the light, to make clear that their deeds are done in God.”

Jesus’ gorgeous words to Nicodemus in John’s Gospel, on this Gaudete Fourth Lenten Sunday, now forever-quoted, “Yes, God so loved the world that God gave God’s only Son, that whoever believes in him may not die but may have eternal life” could easily become the Lenten banner over every Church door, inviting us all to such a joyous, renewal of faith (the meaning of “Gaudete”), that we can as an institution overcome our fears, face our failures, and become a more just and inclusive Church. That we radiate the Gaudete Joy of Christ disciples convinced of such unconditional love.

Jesus continues: “God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.” If we really believe these incredible words of Jesus, then whether it is racism or sexism or any other institutional sin, we can make Lent the powerful season of conversion it is meant to be. We can face anything, and yes, face our institutional sins, because we are utterly convinced in the forgiving, saving/redeeming love of God revealed in the dying and rising of Jesus Christ.

So, Lent is all about baptismal life, life of right relationship in community, life that is ever more whole and integrated because it is a life full of God’s Love. That was Christ’s invitation to Nicodemus and is Christ’s invitation to us, as His Body in space and time. May we rejoice on this Gaudete Sunday to be ever born anew, addressing our institutional failings, and shining before our catechumens with the very light of the risen Christ.

Amen.

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