

A Priest's Journey through Lent and Easter

By Fr. Vernon Meyer

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As a priest, I find the Seasons of Lent and Easter to be the most difficult time of the year for me, and at the same time the most fantastic time of the year. Perhaps the childhood memories of strict fasting and abstinence, the sufferings of Christ and the all too habitual confessions hinder my adult experience of the Lenten scriptures and the rites and rituals of the seasons.

For me as a priest, the season of Lent seems to come on the heels of the Christmas season, giving little time to prepare for the intensity and demands of the liturgies of Lent, let alone the different spiritual focus. It was as if we just got Jesus born, and now we were nailing him to the cross; from childhood to adulthood in a span of a couple of months, just too quick. Maybe the problem was that I wanted to stay with the joy of Christmas rather than face the sufferings of Lent (knowing that resurrection would return the joy didn't help me deal with the challenge).

As priests, we have to work on many levels at the same time. We have a public role as presider, preacher, teacher, healer, and mentor. At the same time, we have the private level of our own spiritual faith journey. It isn't as if we take off one hat and put on another. Rather the two (and probably a few other roles) are constantly intertwined. The Lenten and Easter Season increases the inter-connection between the two, for as much as we preach, teach, and mentor a community in their journey of conversion, our own journey of conversion is being mentored. In relation to these thoughts, we (the editors) sent a questionnaire to some of our Encountered priests asking for their reflections on priesthood and Lent and Easter.

The question was asked, "As priests, what deaths and resurrections have we experienced in our priesthood?"

"What parts of our journey reflect the passion and resurrection of Jesus?"

Fr. Gregory Boisvert (ordained in 1951 and Encountered in 1979) of Knoxville, Tennessee, comments that the deaths in priesthood come as a result of rejection and non-acceptance by coworkers, fellow priests, and people in the parish. He relates however, that "no death occurs without a living system breaking down, and part of resurrection was my dying to myself to bear new fruit." Fr. Gregory goes on to say that while "rejection is a passion and death which brings atonement, revived ministry is a near glorious appearance after resurrection."

Fr. John Ludvik S.J. (ordained in 1971 and Encountered in 1976) of Portland, Oregon, describes early disillusionment and suffering in trying to cope with tension that existed between himself and his bishop as an experience of passion and death in his priesthood. He goes on to describe an experience of resurrection. As he tells the story: "In 1992 I had a car accident while working as a chaplain in a mental institution. I was awestruck how the patients began to minister to me when I came back with a brace which actually had a big white cross that I wore in front of me for six months. Many of the patients avoided me before the accident, but when they saw me broken they could identify and we bonded. They ministered much more to me than I did to them."

Fr. Con Kelleher (ordained in 1956 and Encountered in 1987) of Brainerd, Minnesota, characterizes his experience of leaving his native Ireland as a death. Being separated from his family and his seminary classmates left him lonely and in culture shock. He observes, however, that the "love I experienced from the people of the parish and also the great joy of being able to serve the Lord and God's people in the priesthood" was like resurrection to him.

For myself, **Fr. Vernon Meyer** (ordained in 1979 and Encountered in 1979), the deaths in priesthood came in the times of disillusionment with the church and conflict with fellow priests. "I was a strong idealist and when things didn't move as fast as I thought they should, or when hopes and dreams failed to materialize, I found myself lost and empty." The resurrection came for me on my first M.E. Weekend and subsequent Weekends when I not only heard the invitation to accept God's love, but I also heard and received the love of numerous couples. "In these experiences of resurrection I learned to accept the deaths so as to move through the pain to feel renewed life and commitment to my priesthood."

In the life of a priest, then, the journey of conversion brings both death and resurrection to our lives. In a very real way, the struggle of our priesthood and our own personal life, is journey into the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Another question was asked: "What gives you the most joy in celebrating the Lenten and Easter Season?" For us as priests it gives great joy to be involved in the Rites and rituals of Initiation. To witness the catechumens' and candidates' enthusiasm for the faith and the Church; to be a part of their baptism; and to welcome them to the table of the Eucharist, brings the deepest joy to our priesthood.

And finally, we asked this question: "What would you hope that couples and priests would experience this Lenten and Easter season?"

Fr. John Ludvik recommends that couples and priests just be with Jesus in the Scriptures. "Look at him. Watch him. See how much he loves you! See how he calls you to new life as well."

Fr. Con suggests that couples and priests "grow closer to Christ and deepen our awareness of the saving act of Jesus in his death and resurrection."

Fr. Gregory invites couples and priests "to experience the glorious renewal of their love and the new life of Christ."

My comments would be that in this Holy Season we experience a deeper conversion to the Gospel, and that we share more deeply in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The inter-connection between priesthood and the individual journey of conversion comes at the most intimate points of contact between ourselves as priests, you as couples, and the whole of the People of God. These points of intimate contact are holy, sacramental moments in our lives as church - Baptism, Eucharist, Reconciliation, Weddings and Funerals.

The depth of our conversion is very often reflected in the depth our intimacy with the People of God. Lent and Easter heighten the intimate connections, as well as providing the method and the means of strengthening our priesthood through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.