

The long Lent

Back in 2010, a newspaper article described the sexual abuse crisis in the church as “a long Lent.” At the time, I regarded such a description as unfair to the season of Lent. The article chastised the church’s leaders for their failures but also depicted the church itself as caught in a sorry and hopeless quagmire.

But Lent isn’t about misery and hopelessness. Quite the opposite. In fact, the liturgy describes Lent as God’s “gracious gift,” a time when his people prepare to celebrate the Paschal Mystery “with the joy of minds made pure.” The point of Lent’s chastisements is our inward purification by the Holy Spirit, always the key to authentic renewal and joy.

Understood correctly, the season of Lent does indeed shed light on a crisis that plagued victim-survivors of abuse and the church itself for far too long. Thus, when we speak of this crisis as “a long Lent,” this is what we should really mean: this is the time to address this crisis at its roots by the purification and renewal of the church. With that in mind, let me suggest three connections between the season of Lent and the sexual abuse crisis.

First, in Lent each of us must acknowledge our sins by which we reject God’s love and inflict pain on others. As we pray in Psalm 51: “Against you, you alone have I sinned. I have done what is evil in your eyes.” In Lent, we should make a complete and unburdening confession of our sins in the sacrament of reconciliation. Similarly, this is a time when the church’s leaders must fully acknowledge past sins and failures that have inflicted great spiritual, physical and psychological harm on many innocent people. Such an acknowledgement must be coupled with heartfelt resolve to continue helping victim-survivors who struggle with the ongoing impact of their sexual abuse.

Second, the Lenten confession of our sins is more than wiping the slate clean. It must be accompanied by earnest prayer for interior purification. Again, to quote Psalm 51: “A clean heart create in me, God, renew within me a steadfast spirit.” Through prayer, penance and almsgiving, we seek to stand transparent before the God who looks deeply into our hearts. We pray that our external words and actions

may flow from a heart and soul that have been cleansed of our sins and impure motives by the refining fire of God's love.

Something similar needs to happen continually in the church's life. It is not enough for church leaders to admit past sins and errors; neither is it enough to strengthen measures to prevent abuse and to attain greater accountability - vitally important as these are. Truthfully, all such efforts aimed at transparency will miss the mark unless they proceed from prayerful and discerning hearts and minds that have been thoroughly purified and renewed by God's Holy Spirit.

Third, during Lent we acknowledge our sins and repent of them so that we might embrace our faith more boldly and live it more courageously and lovingly. Lent is also a time of growth in the church's life - interior growth and the joy of adding new members at Easter. So too, even in this most challenging time in the church's life, we must not lose heart. We must continue to proclaim and live the Gospel with confidence and love. We must continue to be people of charity and compassion. We must be people open to the Holy Spirit by whom we are joined to Christ and to one another in the church.

May this long Lent lead to an Easter of renewed hope and joy for ourselves, for the church, and for those who have been harmed.