

Feature

'New' Lent: a time of communal purification

By Father Robert J. Kennedy

One Ash Wednesday several years ago, after I had finished the service in which I used the preferred formula for the distribution of ashes, "Turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel," I was confronted by one parishioner whom I knew quite well.

"What's the matter, Father?" he asked good-humoredly. "Aren't I 'dust' anymore?" I responded with equal good humor and suggested that if he had been listening to my homily, he would know why I had not used the more familiar formula. Of course he had indeed been listening very carefully, and went on to say that he had found the "new" form more challenging and more hopeful.

This week, the Christian people have again accepted the cross of ashes on their foreheads, and have begun the season of Lent. United by this gesture of repentance, we join those preparing for the sacraments of initiation at the Easter Vigil — catechumens — in a six-week process of purification. It is a process that will seek to

eliminate from our lives all that has turned our baptismal consecration to dust and to strengthen our faithful living of the Christ-life. Through such a process, all will be readied for the celebration of baptism or the renewal of baptism at Easter which commits us to faithful living of the Gospel.

Now this may seem at first glance to be the opposite of what many of us grew up thinking Lent was — namely dark days of penance and deprivation which compounded the dreariness of late winter. Yet the purpose of the "old" Lent and the "new" Lent are the same. Isn't the acknowledgment of sin in our lives simply another way of asking how we can live the holy life of baptism? Aren't the penances we undertake really the ways we practice Gospel values in our lives? Isn't the engagement in a process of conversion and reconciliation and our celebration of the liturgy of penance the way we renew the grace of our baptism? In short, the business of Lent is and always has been baptism and its life lived according to the Gospel.

There is one significant difference, however, between the "old" and "new" Lent. The Lent of the past appropriately focused on sinful attitudes and forms of behavior, but only in light of the individual conscience, privately understood. The Lenten process stopped at the level of individualistic introspection. The Lent of the present asks us to renew our baptismal integrity — each one individually, to be sure — but as members of the community of faith. For this, after all, is our primary identity: No one can be baptized into Christ and live that Christ-life privately. Christians are radically communal people, sisters and brothers with Christ and one another in the Holy Spirit, one Body of Christ. The unique personal gifts and individual dignity that we have from the same spirit are gifts that follow from the first gift of our membership with one another in Christ.

Lent, as a season of baptismal renewal, is thus a communal undertaking. Catechumens are initiated into the faith community with the help of the faith community and in the midst of the



faith community. Penitents are reconciled to the faith community in the same way. And all believing members grow in the faith of the community in exactly the same way. The church community is the intimate partner of any individual initiation, reconciliation, or continuing conversion which takes place during Lent, or at any other time. And the goal of the Lenten process is a community living more faithfully the communion that is already ours in the death and resurrection of Christ, a community which has heard and responded to the Ash Wednesday invitation: "Turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel."



Linda Dow Hayes/Courier-Journal

Fisher dances for love

Linda Dow Hayes...Courier-Journal

More than 270 students and faculty members at St. John Fisher College participated in the annual Dance For Love on Friday and Saturday, Feb. 3-4. The dance marathon benefits the Teddi Project, which grants wishes to children with cancer in conjunction with Camp Good Days and Special Times. This year, pledges totaled just over \$40,000, beating the previous record of \$27,000. Participants, who began dancing Friday night at 8 p.m. and ended Saturday at the same time, enjoyed music provided by live bands, disc jockeys, and a variety of other groups. Clockwise from top right; marathon participants enjoy a circle dance; aided by Christine Young, Dave Cambria patches up a few blisters; showing signs of exhaustion, dancers take advantage of a slow song to relax; back-lit by a sunny window, these two girls chose a loftier place than the dance floor to shake their stuff; Jessica Hober sneaks in a nap during a dinner break.

