

Lent calls us to deeper bonds of community

By Bishop Matthew H. Clark

As we begin the season of Lent together, I want to express my hope that through our observance of these 40 days we will grow in our appreciation of the Easter feast and will be able to savor more deeply than ever the Christ life we share through baptism.

These weeks call us to a practice of prayer, fasting and almsgiving because all three are symbols and reminders of the inner dispositions of spirit to which the Gospel calls us. They give expression to our dependence on the gracious mercy of God. They help us the better to understand the deep bonds that join us with our brothers and sisters in the human family. They help us to find our own hearts and strengthen them for the healthy service of others.

While we are all called to these practices and dispositions during this time of reconversion, it is good to remember that our responses to that call will vary widely according to such elements as our life experience, faith development, daily responsibilities, health, resources and the concrete opportunities available to us.

Fasting will mean something very different to a healthy, well-fed, robust adult from what it will mean to someone who cannot be sure today whether there will bread on the table tomorrow. The call to almsgiving might touch the heart of the millionaire and the pauper in



A LONG THE WAY

diverse ways. And who could expect the cloistered monk and the young mother balancing job and child care to pray in exactly the same way?

No, it's important that each of us in our community of faith honestly consider the season's invitation and do the best we can to respond to it with generous hearts.

When we approach Lent in that way, our observance of the season will more likely come from inside us and be more closely related to the real circumstances of our lives. And when that happens, our Lenten observance is less likely to be a test of discipline and more likely to be an expression of our need and desire to draw closer to Christ in our daily lives.

Whatever you decide about your own observance of this holy season, I ask that

you do so with a lively and loving awareness of those who will be receiving the Sacraments of Initiation at the Easter Vigil. They are signs of God's faithful love for our community and reminders to us all that we all are called to prepare well for that great feast.

Next week we will be with those preparing to become part of our faith community during five Rites of Election. They will take place at St. Mary's Elmira on Sunday afternoon; at Sacred Heart Cathedral on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday evenings; and at St. Francis DeSales, Geneva on Friday evening. I always enjoy those celebrations very much. I think I do so because they gather people who experience a sense of growth and discovery and new possibilities. That is always exciting. But I think the lasting richness of such experiences is their ability to remind us that our faith can be the source of such gifts for all of us every day that we live.

Before I close I do want to share with you the good news that my niece Jane and her husband, Scott Neff, gave birth to Julie Katherine Neff on February 14. I had the joy of seeing her last week. How do I describe for you just how beautiful she is? I'm not sure I can, but I can give you a sense of it by telling you that Julie may crash through the standards set by her mother and her aunts. And I never thought that possible!

Peace to all.

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