

COLUMNISTS

Lent should prepare catechumens, too

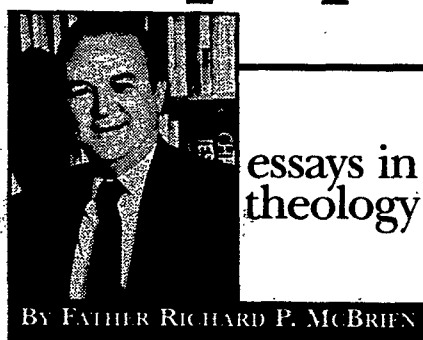
During the first three centuries most Christians prepared for Easter by fasting for only two or three days. In some places, the paschal fast was extended to the entire week, now called Holy Week.

In Rome the Lenten season lasted for three weeks, and its main purpose was to prepare catechumens for baptism at Easter. By the fourth century, the Roman Lent was extended to 40 days, the length of Jesus' fast in the desert (Luke 4:1-13). But it was still viewed as a preparation for Easter and for the baptism of new Christians.

In the fifth and sixth centuries, when infant baptism became far more common than adult baptism, Lent was gradually transformed into a time of prayer and penance, modeled on a 40-day, post-Epiphanian fast popular among monks.

It was not until the reform of the rites of Holy Week by Pope Pius XII in 1956, and the renewal of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA), mandated by the Second Vatican Council and initiated in the early 1970s, that the connection was restored between Lent and the baptismal celebration at the Easter Vigil.

Before the reform of the Holy Week liturgies, the only religious service on the day before Easter, Holy Saturday, was conducted very early in the morning. Because of its length and complexity, including



BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

extensive readings from Scripture in Latin, relatively few parishioners and a few unlucky altar boys were in attendance.

For Catholics at this time, the high point of the week was Good Friday, which, according to their catechism theology, commemorated the event by which Christ redeemed us. By contrast, Jesus' resurrection from the dead was understood as the reward bestowed on him by his Father for having endured the passion and death on the cross. It also served an apologetical purpose, providing an irrefutable proof of Jesus' divinity.

Because of major developments in the liturgical movement and in Catholic biblical scholarship in the 1940s and 50s, our theological perception of the Resurrection began to change substantially, and with it our understanding of the place of

Easter in the church's liturgical year.

Once again, Lent was seen and experienced as a season of preparation for Easter — preparation not just of individuals but of the whole community of faith. With the restored RCIA, Lent served anew as the "home-stretch," as it were, of the long process of initiation of new converts into full membership in the church.

On the First Sunday of Lent there is the formal enrollment of the names of the catechumens, known also as the rite of election. It ratifies the catechumens' readiness for the sacraments of initiation (baptism, confirmation, and Eucharist) and provides an opportunity for them to express their will to receive these sacraments.

There follows a period of purification and enlightenment, embracing the Third, Fourth and Fifth Sundays of Lent, in which catechumens are encouraged to purify their minds and hearts from temptation and sin, and to advance in their union with Christ.

The process reaches its climax in the liturgy of the Easter Vigil itself, but does not end there. A "suitable period" of post-baptismal catechesis, known as mystagogy (derived from a Greek word meaning "to teach a doctrine," or "to instruct into the mysteries"), continues the new convert's instruction on the Christian moral life,

the sacraments, the Trinity and prayer.

Although it is almost 30 years since the restoration of the RCIA and some 45 years since the reform of the Holy Week liturgies, there are many in the church who continue to regard Lent in less traditional, less liturgically appropriate ways.

For them, Lent remains a season devoted to prayer and penance, but without explicit reference to baptism, to the Easter Vigil, or to their own responsibility for nurturing the new Christians' faith-development and participation in the church's sacramental and ministerial life (RCIA, nn. 4 and 9).

For too many Catholics, Lent is still primarily, if not exclusively, a time for personal asceticism and private devotions: giving up sweets and various forms of entertainment, or attending daily Mass.

Few assumptions are wider of the theological mark than the belief that the Mass is a devotional exercise, like the Stations of the Cross, that one attends as a form of personal sacrifice. The Eucharist is a communal celebration, not a penance.

Just as Lent is directed toward baptism, so baptism, like all the sacraments, is directed toward the Eucharist.

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Father McBrien is a professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame.

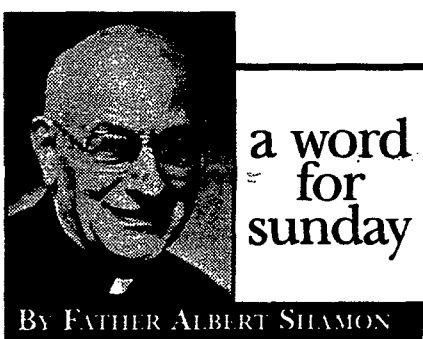
God judges thoughts and attitudes, not actions alone

8th Sunday of the Year (Feb 25); (R3) Luke 6:39-45; (R1) Sirach 27:4-7; (R2) 1 Corinthians 15:54-58.

One day Tim Storey parked in front of his neighborhood barber shop. As he fished around for his wallet, he felt the sickening crunch of metal hitting metal. Somebody hit his car! He jumped out to look, but didn't see anyone. As he was muttering under his breath about stupid drivers, a lady came out of the shop and said, "I saw the whole thing." He was the stupid driver. Instead of putting his car in park, Tim had accidentally shifted it into reverse. No one had hit him, he had backed into the car behind him.

It's so easy to pass judgment without all the facts. So Jesus said, "Why look at the speck in your brother's eye when you miss the plank in your own?" We all tend to see the flaws in others and overlook our own. Actually, that is not too surprising.

Next Sunday's Gospel tells us that when we pass judgment on others, we are taking the place of God. "A good man produces goodness from the good in his heart; an evil man produces evil out of his store of evil" (Luke 7:45). Good and evil spring from the heart. And only God can read the human heart. Thus Ben Johnson once said, "God defers his judgment till



BY FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

Judgment Day, let us do likewise."

It is so easy to criticize, so easy to judge. But we don't know other persons' circumstances. We don't know the burdens that they carry. To know all is to forgive.

Og Mandino wrote: "I will live this day as if it were Christmas. I will be a giver of gifts and deliver to my enemies the gift of forgiveness; my opponents, tolerance; my friends, a smile; my children, a good example, and every gift will be wrapped with unconditional love. I will remember that those who have fewest regrets are those who take each moment as it comes, for all that it is worth."

By our actions we may appear holy enough to walk on water. But God doesn't judge us just by our actions; our thoughts and attitudes are equally important in his

sight. So in order to live a life that is pleasing to God, it is essential to get our heart and our actions in perfect alignment. When our car's wheels get out of alignment, we start to notice a little shimmy in the car. At first, it's just a little distracting. But if we don't get it fixed, that little shimmy will soon turn into a big problem.

It is the same way with our hearts. We cannot purify our hearts on our own. We do not have the capacity for holiness within ourselves. We must turn our hearts over to God, we must pray for holiness and let his Holy Spirit work in us.

The Honorable Perrin H. Lowrey, circuit court judge in Mississippi, had the sad task of convicting and fining a man who had been a close friend in childhood. The man's mother, a poor widow, wrote to Judge Lowrey, asking him to overturn the judgment and forget the fine. Since her son was broke and unemployed; she would have to pay his fine. The financial burden was more than she could bear.

The judge signed the docket that sealed the poor man's fate and adjourned the court. To remit the fine would violate his oath to uphold the law, and justice would suffer for the sake of mercy. But when he wrote back to the widow, he enclosed a personal check to cover both the fine and

court costs. Concluding his letter, he said, "I send this check with joy because it gives me the opportunity to be both merciful and just."

God is that kind of judge. He is the perfect judge, merciful and just. All of his judgments are filtered through his perfect holiness, his perfect love. That is why God said, "Judgment is mine; I shall repay."

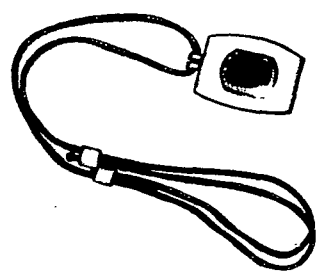
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Father Shamon is administrator of St. Isaac Jogues Chapel, Fleming.

Daily Readings

Monday, February 26
Sirach 17:19-27; Mark 10:17-27
Tuesday, February 27
Sirach 35:1-12; Mark 10:28-31
Wednesday, February 28
Joel 2:12-18; 2 Corinthians 5:20-6:2; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18
Thursday, March 1
Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Luke 9:22-25
Friday, March 2
Isaiah 58:1-9A; Matthew 9:14-15
Saturday, March 3
Isaiah 58:9B-14; Luke 5:27-32

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— Archbishop John P. Foley



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