

Lent is preparation for Easter Vigil



Mike Crupi/Catholic Courier

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ing a survey for the same month of the year as the previous survey. However, the GAO report concluded that in New York over one-half of the nursing home surveys are predictable (www.gao.gov).

The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services reports that 82 percent of nursing homes in New York provide less than the recommended 4.1 hours of daily nursing care for residents; 23 percent of our state's nursing homes provide less than three hours of daily nursing care per resident. According to Nursing Home Community Coalition of New York State, "bedsores, loss of functionality, mental impairment, malnutrition, and dehydration are just some of the results" of understaffing for residents.

Let's hope the near future will bring meaningful reforms to improve our nursing homes.

Mary J. Caruso
Wilson Street
Corning

Endure evil with love

To the editor:

In his Jan. 8 column, Father Richard McBrien asked "Would the pope OK Saddam's execution?" I believe our Pontiff's answer would be "No!"

The Church is correct in teaching that the taking of human life is morally justifiable in self-defense or in the course of a just war. But, we have no right to execute one convicted of a capital crime, however heinous. Im-

prisonment without parole, yes, but no execution. The arguments against capital punishment are many. We must pay heed to them.

Father David Knight wrote a remarkable essay, "The Scandal of the Cross." I'd like to repeat a few of his words:

"Is it really possible to endure evil with love? Is it possible to love back when we are being tortured? Robbed? Raped? When a loved one is killed before our very eyes?"

"No," we spontaneously answer, "we can endure these things if we have no choice, and perhaps endure them without giving in to hatred. But to endure them with love — to love back in response to such evil — is just not humanly possible. It cannot be done."

"And yet Jesus did it. What is humanly impossible can be done. It can be done, not just by God, but by any human being who shares in the life of God. And this is what grace is: a sharing in the life of God."

I corresponded with a man on death row for about seven years before he was murdered by the State of Texas. It was a sad and compelling story. At one time he appeared on "60 Minutes" and televised nationally was an interview with him the night of the execution. The cost in heartbreak — and money — was tremendous. Not only the victim's family suffered, but his own family as well.

Please, no more executions. It is beneath human dignity.

Grace B. Carnes
Eagle Ridge Circle
Rochester

As the church prepares for another Lenten season, I recall a Socratic-type exchange that one of my seminary professors initiated with us many years ago.

"What is the first thing that comes to mind," he asked, "when you hear the word, 'Lent'?" Our conventional answers were penance and "giving things up."

When it became obvious that no one was about to give the answer he was looking for, he finally said, in benign exasperation, "Spring!"

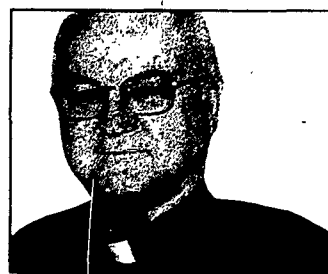
In hindsight, however, our teacher was right. The Middle English word for "Lent" is *lenten*, which means "springtime." But a more liturgically correct answer would have been "Easter."

The Lenten season actually exists to prepare the local faith community and the universal church for the celebration of the greatest feast in its liturgical year.

Fifty years ago, we young seminarians — and most other Catholics — could not have given such a liturgically sophisticated answer. The term "Easter Vigil" wasn't in common use then.

The comparable celebration was known only as Holy Saturday. It yielded the longest, possibly dullest, liturgical ceremony of the entire year, and attracted only a handful of people.

The service was held at seven o'clock in the morning, not, as now, late in the evening, with Mass at midnight. It included lengthy readings from the Old and



Father Richard McBrien

Essays in Theology

New Testaments, in Latin, and a series of mysterious rites involving fire and a candle at the back of the darkened church. The Easter Vigil now is the culmination of the church's liturgical year.

The history of Lent, however, is a bit more complicated than the Easter Vigil. During the first three centuries most Christians prepared for Easter simply by fasting for two and three days beforehand. A short "Lent," indeed.

In some places, however, the "paschal fast" was extended to the entire week before Easter, now known as Holy Week. In Rome itself, the paschal fast probably lasted for three weeks, but by the fourth century it had developed into our modern Lent of 40 days.

The conventional belief has been that the 40-day period was modeled on the 40-day fast that Jesus endured in the desert (Luke 4:13), but, more recently, liturgical scholars like Nathan Mitchell of the University of Notre Dame have concluded that "the development of

Lent was also influenced by another 40-day fasting tradition, an ascetical one based on imitation of Jesus' life, which began immediately after the feast of Epiphany [in early January] ... " ("Lent," The Harper-Collins Encyclopedia of Catholicism).

This post-Epiphany fast, with its emphasis on prayer and penance, was especially popular among monks, Mitchell reports. Nevertheless, these penitential themes did not become dominant until the original conception of Lent, as a period of spiritual and catechetical formation in preparation for baptism at the Easter Vigil, began to recede in the fifth and sixth centuries. This was likely the result of the growing practice of baptizing infants.

It took many more centuries — and the liturgical renewal of the Second Vatican Council — to bring about a restoration of this original meaning of the Lenten season as a preparation for Easter.

The centerpieces of this retrieval effort were the restoration of the rites of Holy Week by Pope Pius XII in 1956 and the conciliar renewal of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults in the following decade.

But the connection between "Lent" and "spring" still works, too.

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

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