

The beginning of the Ash Wednesday liturgy is one of those classic texts. It probably isn't on the tips of many tongues, and it certainly is not on the best seller list. However, it possesses a rhythm and perspective that is not only helpful to those actively entering Lent but also offers a frame for how we see ourselves and our life together throughout the whole year. The exhortation follows:

*Dear People of God: The first Christians observed with great devotion the days of our Lord's passion and resurrection, and it became the custom of the Church to prepare for them by a season of penitence and fasting. This season of Lent provided a time in which converts to the faith were prepared for Holy Baptism. It was also a time when those who, because of notorious sins, had been separated from the body of the faithful were reconciled by penitence and forgiveness, and restored to the fellowship of the Church. Thereby, the whole congregation was put in mind of the message of pardon and absolution set forth in the Gospel of our Savior, and of the need which all Christians continually have to renew their repentance and faith.*

*I invite you, therefore, in the name of the Church, to the observance of a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God's holy Word.*

The evolution of Lent finds its origin in the practice of the early Christians, and, in particular, their memorial for their friend, Jesus, upon the anniversary of his death and the experience of his resurrection. *Lex orandi, lex credendi* is the latin phrase given to this type of experience. Basically, the way one prays/practices, becomes the way that one believes. The beauty of this is how organic many of our practices were. They were born out of the experience and pathos of the people.

As noted, the season becomes a way of initiating converts to the faith. In fact, in an ancient house church that has been discovered and early church documents, it is clear that the community gathered together to hear the word, and, during Lent, a portion of the congregation moved to another room for the eucharist, while the catechumens--as they were known--remained for their instruction. At our Easter Vigil this year, there will be two baptisms, and this is the historic culmination of the Lenten study. Entry into the community through the cleansing ritual of the baptism on the eve of the Festival of New Life!

Furthermore, you have to love the phrasing of the next line. What, exactly, were considered *notorious* sins? Did we have murderers in the early church? What were the guidelines for delineating such egregiousness? Nonetheless, it is clear that what the church saw as important was reconciliation with others. Wherever possible, we are to be about the business of seeking reconciliation and restoration with self, others, and the world. Indeed, the closing sentence of the

first paragraph underscores the need that we all have to renew repentance and faith. There is no “in” crowd in Christianity. In some sense, we are aware that we are all on the “outs” and we need desperately the grace that precedes our confession and undergirds our forgiveness.

Such a perspective will never fully answer all of our questions. Yet, as a way of life, a rhythm of being, a mindset for community there are many other worse ways to go. What we end up recognizing, perhaps, in the Lenten journey is that we don’t travel alone. We travel with others, and the beauty of faith is to possess the vision of recognizing Christ in the midst of those very souls. Thus, as the liturgies introduction to Ash Wednesday notes, I invite you all to a holy Lent. Blessings on the journey.