

Rekindle the flames of faith when the embers grow cold

Here we are approaching the end of Lent, anticipating the Church-filling solemnities of Palm Sunday and Easter. Hopefully the days between the blackened cross of Ash Wednesday and the fresh-cut scent of the new palms to be blessed next weekend, come the praiseworthy stories of people's Lenten sacrifices and interior conversions.

Parish scrutinies relating to the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) should have helped the larger parish community to reflect on their own journeys of faith: where they've come from, where they are now, and, most especially, where they are going.

Meanwhile, the month of March hinted at the beginning of things to come with the arrival of the first day of spring (March 20). Though snow has been no stranger to our area this year, there remains a hope for warmer days and brighter evenings as we approach April and Easter.

Part of any Lenten program is personal renewal and spiritual growth, yet it also should also have motivated us to reach out to someone who has been away from active faith practice, to invite them to consider rekindling the hearth of their souls with new warmth and enthusiasm.

"The Silent Sermon," an anonymous story working its way around the Internet, offers a powerful illustration of our interconnectedness as members of Christ's Body, the Church.

A member of a certain church, who previously had been attending services regularly, stopped going. After a few weeks, the pastor decided to visit him.

It was a chilly evening. The pastor found the man at home alone, sitting before a blazing fire. Guessing the reason for his pastor's visit, the man welcomed him, led him to a comfortable chair near the fireplace and waited. The pastor made himself at home but said nothing. In the grave silence, he contemplated the dance of the flames around the burning logs.

After some minutes, the pastor took the fire tongs, carefully picked up a brightly burning ember and placed it to one side of the hearth all alone. Then he sat back in his chair, still silent.

The host watched all this in quiet contemplation. As the one lone ember's flame flickered and diminished, there was a momentary glow and then its fire was no more. Soon it was cold and dead.

Not a word had been spoken since the initial greeting. The pastor glanced at his watch and realized it was time to leave. He slowly stood up, picked up the cold, dead ember, and placed it back in the middle of the fire. Immediately it began to glow once more, with the light and warmth of the burning coals around it.

As the pastor reached the door to leave, his host said, with a tear running down his cheek: 'Thank you so much for your visit and especially for the fiery sermon. I will be back in church next Sunday.'

We live in a world today, which tries to say too much with too little. Consequently, few listen. Sometimes the best sermons are the ones left unspoken.

Palm Sunday provides us with a tremendous opportunity to reach out to a relative or neighbor who might be open to returning to Church. While bringing up the subject with some people seems to produce only a heated argument, I still vividly recall a video I saw many years ago, detailing the ministry of an elderly priest. He found himself at a party in someone's home, when a woman walked up to him and said, "I've been away from the Church for a long time."

Not sure how to react, he simply said, "Have you ever thought of coming back?" He was astounded by her reply, "Yes, many times," so he asked why she hadn't returned sooner. Her simple answer—"no one ever asked me before"—prompted him to devote the remaining years of his priesthood to encourage people to follow his example and ask others more often.

Clearly our personal witness and way of life is the strongest invitation.

This is how the early Church grew. From Mary Magdalene and the Apostles and the Emmaus disciples to countless generations thereafter, they weren't afraid to share their experiences of the Risen Jesus. With hearts burning within them, by word and action, they credibly drew so many more to join them. The love Christians had and showed for one another inspired outsiders to come in, willing to risk death to be part of the community that lived the life Jesus espoused, and who, we believe, found the eternal life, which Jesus promised.

May our celebration of Holy Week and Easter put us in touch more deeply with Jesus who gave Himself completely for us and encourage us to live our lives in such a way that they speak loving volumes about what it means to be alive and in love with Christ, our Risen Lord!

SEEING & BELIEVING

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