



SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



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School Mass
3/5/10

Lent is a time for getting our priorities straight. It is a time to acknowledge our dependence on God for all that we are and all that we have. As we prepare to celebrate this Mass let us pause to consider our failure to trust in him.

If you look up the word Lent in a dictionary you will discover that the first meaning given is not the period of forty days in which Christians fast and do penance after the example of Christ's 40 days in the desert. That is the second meaning. The first is "the season of spring". In many households there is the practice of spring cleaning in which the housewife scours the house from top to bottom, throwing out what is no longer needed, what is dirty and beyond repair and making room for things that are fresh and new. Lent is the spring cleaning of our souls, eradicating bad habits and evil thoughts, making room for the risen Lord to come in at Easter and be the center and focus of our life. It may be that the practice of spring cleaning is more common in Europe than in the United States. I remember my mother regularly going over old clothes every spring and either throwing them out, giving them away or preserving them with moth balls between layers to discourage moths from eating holes in them. I confess that I am not very good at throwing things out. I keep thinking I might use them some time and hang on to them. But clearing out the old is only half the job. You remember the gospel story of driving out the devil and sweeping the house clean. Having made room for the Lord, unless we invite him in seven other devils more evil than the first will take over and our condition will be worse than before the spring cleaning.

In his Rule for Monks, St. Benedict has a chapter on the observance of Lent. He tells his monks: "to wash away in this holy season the negligences of other times." You see the parallel with the idea of spring cleaning. St. Benedict says we do this "by adding to the usual measure of our service something by way of private prayer and abstinence from food or drink, so that each of us will have something to offer God of his own will with the joy of the Holy Spirit. ... Let each deny himself some food, drink, sleep, needless talking and idle jesting." He then adds: "and look forward to holy Easter with joy and spiritual longing." It



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may seem odd that this instruction is tagged onto the list of penances. But this is what Lent is all about. Our penances – perhaps giving up candy when we were children and alcohol as adults -- are not ends in themselves. They have a positive purpose, not a negative one. We mortify ourselves and do penance in order to rise with Christ. We throw out the old, not to leave an empty space, but so that it might be filled with the love of God. Lent is not supposed to be a gloomy time, not just something to be endured. We should not lose sight of the joy of Easter during this season since the whole purpose of Lent is a preparation for Easter. We mortify ourselves in order to rise with Christ to new life.

The wonderful Easter Proclamation, sung on Easter night before the newly lit paschal candle symbolizing the risen Christ, summarizes what Lent is leading up to. Its theme is joy: Rejoice, heavenly powers ... Rejoice, O earth ... For Christ has ransomed us with his blood, and paid for us the price of Adam's sin to our eternal Father ... What good would life have been to us, had Christ not come as our Redeemer? ... The power of this holy night dispels all evil, washes guilt away, restores innocence, brings mourners joy, casts out hatred, and brings us peace." This is why St. Benedict tells us "to look forward to holy Easter with joy and spiritual longing" and makes that the focus of his Chapter on Lent. The opening Prayer of today's Mass reinforces this: "... May our acts of penance bring us your forgiveness, open our hearts to your love, and prepare us for the coming feast of the resurrection." +