

“The Joy of Lent”

For most of the history of the Church Lent has been considered a penitential season. Thus Lent was to be a season where we were to fast (abstaining from a food or practice for the forty days of Lent), repent, consider our mortality, and renew our souls by reading scripture and devotions. These are all good practices; however, it has also fostered gloominess of mind and demeanor.

We in the Church seem to have gotten it into our heads that Lent is a time for misery. Repentance means to abuse oneself, like the monks in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* who walk through the village chanting in Latin and bashing themselves in the head with boards.<sup>1</sup> One could also go to the extreme of mortifying the flesh with forms of self torture.

Listen to the blessing over the ashes that we will hear shortly, there is a line that we should be especially focused upon. That is we are to take on these practices in Lent in order “to remember that it is only by [God’s] gracious gift that we are given everlasting life.”

When I give a gift to someone I hope that their response is joy and gladness. I expect a hug, a word of thanks, and an evident feeling of delight. I once gave a girlfriend roses for her birthday and she cried. She did not cry out of joy, rather she said that she thought she did not deserve them. I felt awful. Do you think that God wants us to be miserable because of the gift of everlasting life? I don’t.

God wants us to come closer. God wants us to repent, in the sense of the Greek word *metanoia*, to turn around or to change our minds; or as Baptist preachers of my youth would say “to get back on the straight and narrow.” God wants us to find joy in this life. God’s gifts are to be relished, savored, and embraced. God wants us to be a people of love for ourselves and one another.

We are to be a people of joy even in times of hardship. St. Francis who is dear to many people, even those who are not Christian, is a marvelous example. He suffered many severe health issues during the last years of his life. He was blind and endured the treatments of the physicians that did nothing to resolve his problem. Instead they caused him great pain. He was given the gift of the stigmata, but this meant that his hands, feet and side continuously oozed blood. He eventually was unable to walk and had to be carried about by his brother friars.

One evening in his last days the brothers built him a lean-to outside of the convent where the Poor Clares lived. The idea was that the sisters could care for him if he called out in the night. But during the night field mice invaded the lean-to attracted to the warmth. Francis found himself with mice scurrying all over his body and he was helpless to do anything about it.

When the brothers returned in the morning and pulled back the blanket that covered the entrance to the lean-to scores of mice came rushing out. The brothers were horrified, but Francis called out for a scribe. In the terror of the night Francis had composed what is considered to be the first great poem in vernacular Italian—“The Canticle to Brother Sun.”<sup>2</sup>

The joy in Francis’ heart could not be overcome by blindness, crippling wounds, pain, or the mice crawling over his body and nibbling at his clothing. His was a joyful Christian heart. His was a Lenten spirit of gratitude for the gracious gifts that God had given him. Whatever our Lenten practices may be, abstaining from something or taking on a spiritual practice, let it be with joy and thanksgiving for God’s gracious gifts. Let us live this Lent in the spirit of St. Francis.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YgYEuJ5u1K0>

<sup>2</sup> See *Salvation: Scenes from the Life of St. Francis* by Valerie Martin ©2002