

ASH WEDNESDAY
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A REALISTIC LENT

A friend of mine once asked a group of colleagues whether they thought of themselves as *optimists* or *pessimists*. The results were fairly even. But, one person said that she was neither, she was a *realist!* It occurs to me that these are three helpful lenses with which to view Lent.

Most *optimists* have a positive attitude towards life and their own part in it. Some of them even think that Lent is a downer. But, when pushed, they admit that even they have areas in their spiritual and moral lives that could stand improvement. So, they view Lent as an opportunity to move ahead in those areas of their life. They often come up with ambitious plans to do just that with the confidence that they will, with God's help of course, make great progress. Their biblical motto is: I can do all things through Christ Jesus, who strengthens us!

Most *pessimists*, on the contrary, have a pretty negative attitude about life, about other people, and even themselves. Their biblical motto is that we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. They usually zone in on the penitential aspect of Lent and its emphasis on self-examination and repentance. They view Lent as a requirement for themselves and the whole Church to take sin much more seriously. They love the *Penitential Order* and the *Litany of Penitence*.

They naturally are not so sure about how much spiritual progress is likely on our Lenten journey, but are committed to giving it a shot.

Most *realists* recognize that life in general and theirs in particular is a mixed bag of both positive and negative elements. They try to see the goodness in God's creation, in other people, and in themselves. Yet, they are under no illusions about how much evil is loose in the world today. They also know that everyone who is honest with themselves has to wrestle with their own set of demons and limitations. Realism tells us that sometimes our better nature is in charge, other times our lesser nature. Lent then is a time to gain greater clarity about just where we are at this moment in our spiritual journey, where we are in the contest between the angels and the demons at work in us. The realist motto is that God loves just as we are, but loves us too much to leave us there.

Recently, a good friend of mine went skiing in Colorado. In order to keep up with her husband, who loves to ski at least five miles at a time, she labored mightily. She would then end up completely exhausted. This time she let her husband go off on his own, and instead hired a personal trainer. The trainer took her to the beginners' slope and started her on the basics. It turns out that she was busy moving her upper torso in addition to her legs, as she zigged and zagged down the slopes, which was what was exhausting her. The trainer taught her how to avoid moving her upper torso. By the end of the week she was skiing as fast as

before and was not at all exhausted. The message was simple: it never hurts to go back to the basics when you are not getting the results you want. Also, using a personal trainer can be a very useful thing! In the spiritual life, a personal trainer is called a spiritual director. I have one. He helps me be a *realist*.

Whether you are an *optimist*, *pessimist* or a *realist* Lent provides all of us the basics. We will soon hear those basics read in the challenge the Prayer Book gives us when the celebrant says: "I invite you, 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." (pgs. 264-5) Those are the basic tools of a realistic Lent that help prepare us to better receive and appropriate the love, grace, and peace that God very much wants us to have. The more that happens the more we will be able to see ourselves more positively and to act accordingly towards other people and the world around us. Each of us will use these tools differently, depending upon our personalities and life experiences. Part of the good news of God's love that is ours in Christ Jesus is that it is not meant to make us someone different from who are, but to move us closer to being the best person that God created us uniquely to be. The goal of a realistic Lent is also to open ourselves more and more to the work of the Holy Spirit, which helps us become more Christ-like.

Finally, the Lenten journey is not one that was ever meant to be a solitary one. We are all fellow pilgrims, who are journeying together. Despite our differences we need each other. Christian *optimists*, *pessimists*, and *realists* all share something fundamentally important: we have all been anointed by the same Holy Spirit in Baptism, and marked by the same Christ as His own forever. The Holy Spirit custom designs for each of us spiritual gifts that not only allow us to grow closer to God, but also to share those gifts not only with our fellow Christians, but with the world beyond the Church. The stronger spiritually we become within ourselves, the more we will be empowered and motivated to seek justice and peace and to respect the dignity of every human being.

Good friends, we live in a world that seems to be in an increasingly dark mood that begs for us to let the light of Christ that is in us to shine into that darkness. Lent is a *realistic* time to work on doing just that. AMEN.