

Homily for March 18, 2001  
3rd Sunday of Lent Cycle A (RCIA option)

By Father Charles Bowes

Exodus 17:3-7  
Romans 5:1-2, 5-8  
John 4:5-42

## *Lent isn't just about penance; it's also about baptism.*

Ask Catholics born before the second Vatican Council about their childhood recollections of Lent and they will almost certainly report lush and vivid memories that fill the Catholic imagination with penitential associations.

Prayer (Stations of the Cross and other devotions), fasting (giving up candy), and alms-giving (saving pennies for the poor children of the world) – these were part and parcel of the Lenten discipline that marked our Catholic consciousness of what Lent is all about. And if you probe deeply, you will still find virtually no one in the pre-Vatican II generation whose Lenten associations are baptismal in character.

But thanks to the specific mandate of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy that the “baptismal character” of Lent should be recovered (#109), more and more of today’s young people are beginning to experience and hopefully may even remember in their later years the initiatory dimension of the season of Lent. The Fathers of this council, speaking specifically of the Lenten season, directed that the two elements that are “especially characteristic of Lent – the recalling of baptism or the preparation for it, and penance –

should be given greater emphasis in the Liturgy and in liturgical catechesis.” (#109) Throughout the Lenten season, thanks to the Rights of Christian Initiation of Adults, we’re reminded constantly not only that some folks in our midst are journeying to the table for the first time either to be baptized or to be received into full communion, but also that we share in that enterprise. The reason we do penance during Lent – all of us – is not just to make ourselves better, but to be in solidarity with those who are preparing to be baptized at the Easter Vigil. We all have a ministry of water – those baptized and those unbaptized. The holy water fonts at our doors are empty during this season, as is the font up front tied as it is to the baptismal font we know throughout the year. Like Moses in the desert – we are to strike the rock to bring forth the water, the living water. It’s not all God’s doing – this providing of living water, the woman at the well in John 4 and Moses in Exodus 17 had to take action. The water did not spring from the rock unbidden, nor did it come forth from the well unhoisted. Moses had to strike the rock and the woman had to pull the rope in order for God’s power to be made known.

The great thing is that since we have been baptized, the living water is already within – it needs only to be let loose to flow – that’s where the penance

comes in. We are to give to the newly baptized the example of our own renewal in the spirit of penance, faith, and charity. We are preparing ourselves to renew our own baptismal promises on Easter. Up to now, *we* lead those who are being received or baptized to the table – but at Easter time they are the first to touch the water, the first to enter the water and make it holy – and then we follow them. We kneel during our scrutinies, a gesture of supplication in acknowledgement of our weakness – inviting, knocking – that the living water may be unleashed for God's invasion of our hearts.

At every Eucharist we enter the timeless moment of Jesus' death and resurrection and ascension. We become the body of Christ for the world we touch invaded by the Spirit of the Risen Lord, the same Spirit which invades the bread and wine and makes them holy. We need those who are journeying to the table for the first time through the baptismal bath or through reconciliation, and they need us to give the example of our own reconciliation, our second baptism, so that we can come to the table and say our yes, our Amen to the Easter promises and to Jesus. Our Lenten Reconciliation Service will take place on Thursday, April 5 – in one sense a time to be baptized all over again. That's why in newly renovated or newly built Catholic churches today the baptismal font is supposed to be proximate to both the chapel of reservation of the Eucharist and to the reconciliation room.

The poet Denise Levertov catches this spirit:

*"Don't say, there is no water.  
...it is still there and always there  
with its quiet song and strange power  
to spring in us,  
up and out through the rock."*

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it's also about baptism.