

Vatican II and the Year of Faith:  
The Joy of Lent and the Life of Prayer

Do you enjoy Lent? You might not if you think of it only as a time for giving things up. Most of us don't like dieting (spiritual or physical), and if that's all Lent is, then it may not be all that pleasurable. But, believe it or not, Lent can be a time of *intense delight!* The Second Vatican Council and the Catechism offer a deeper analysis of Lent. Lent, ultimately, is about learning to take delight in prayer.

The Catechism teaches that Lent is the season for uniting ourselves to the mystery of Jesus in the desert. (CCC 540) Christ's time in the desert was not a diet program, but a total consecration to His divine mission. When Christ renounced earthly food, it was because He had a heavenly meal. "I have food to eat of which you do not know." (John 4:32) This was the mystery He spoke of when He promised us "rivers of living water" that flow from the heart. (John 7:38) Thus, the Council Fathers wrote that prayer should be accompanied by delight. (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 112)

But how can I take delight in prayer? We may think of prayer as primarily petitionary - "The requesting of good things from God," as St. John Damascene said. That is not wrong, but it could be misleading if you think of prayer simply as logging into a Heavenly website to request the latest products. The Catholic view of prayer is far, far richer.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church, following an ancient tradition, describes prayer as "the love of beauty." (*Philokalia*). (CCC 2727). It is "the habit of being in the presence of the thrice-holy God and in communion with him." (CCC 2565) Quoting St. Therese of Lisieux, the Catechism explains:

Prayer is a surge of the heart;  
it is a simple look turned toward heaven,  
it is a cry of recognition and of love,  
embracing both trial and joy. (CCC 2558)

Our delight in prayer comes from recognizing our filial relationship to God. It is a "communion of life" [and] "is always possible because, through Baptism, we have already been united with Christ." (CCC 2565) And, by delighting in the good, we become good. This is why St. John Chrysostom could say, "For it is impossible, utterly impossible, for the man who prays eagerly and invokes God ceaselessly ever to sin." (CCC 2744)

There are many ways for us to experience this delight in prayer. The Catechism mentions three primary modes of prayer. First, we can pray with words, either spontaneously or through memorized prayers. This is called vocal prayer, and it is necessary for us to give expression to God to our thoughts and feelings. (CCC 2700-2704)

Second, we can employ the imagination through meditating on the truths of the faith. This is called meditative or mental prayer. "Meditation engages thought, imagination, emotion, and

desire. This mobilization of faculties is necessary in order to deepen our convictions of faith, prompt the conversion of our heart, and strengthen our will to follow Christ." (2705-2708) The mysteries of the Rosary offer an excellent occasion for mental prayer.

Finally, the Holy Spirit can infuse a supernatural prayer, a love of divine realities exceeding our natural capacity. This is called contemplative prayer. "It is a gift, a grace; it can be accepted only in humility and poverty. Contemplative prayer is a covenant relationship established by God within our hearts. Contemplative prayer is a *communion* in which the Holy Trinity conforms man, the image of God, "to his likeness." (CCC 2709-2719).

In Lent, we must be particularly mindful that prayer is ultimately liturgical. According to the Catechism, prayer "internalizes and assimilates the liturgy." Even when it is lived out "in secret," the Catechism says that "prayer is always prayer *of the Church*; it is a communion with the Holy Trinity." (CCC 2665) Prayer is ultimately liturgical because prayer is centered on Christ, whom we meet in the liturgy.

The Second Vatican Council teaches that the prayer of Lent should have a distinctly sacramental and liturgical character. During Lent, we recall (or prepare for) baptism. We embrace the sacrament of penance. Above all, we prepare for the Pascal mystery in the Church's Easter Liturgy. (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 109-110)

Lent is a time of penance, abnegation and fasting, but it is also a time for spiritual delights. Let us learn, with Our Lord, to delight in prayer. I commend to you the Catechism of the Catholic Church and its excellent catechesis on prayer. If we follow it, we can say with Christ "My food is to do the will of him who sent me." (John 4:34)