NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Lenten observance transforms us from cacophony to symphony

Christopher Frechette | Mar. 12, 2014 Spiritual Reflections

Lent is upon us. How does it grab your imagination? By now you've likely decided what to give up this year, how to donate alms, when to give prayer some extra time ... all of these may have been on your mind, but where has your imagination gone? For several years now, mine has been returning to an image that helps both my personal prayer and my participation in liturgy. It also grounds my reflections on almsgiving and fasting.

Imagine attending a symphony or school orchestra concert. Picture arriving with the crowd and anticipating how you will relax and enjoy the music. Behind the sounds of chatter and movement, hear the instruments as they warm up. Dozens of different instruments are playing in complete disregard for each other, some engaged in sweeping scales, others going over this or that bit of melody. The sounds simply clash -- quite literally a cacophony. I actually enjoy this, but I wouldn't be there if the orchestra was intent on doing nothing else all evening.

At a certain moment all the instruments go quiet, which cues the crowd to quiet down, too. Into that silence, an oboist sounds one clear note, an A. Then, all the other instruments match that note, resonating in a unison made striking by contrast to the cacophony that it replaces. Tuning to one instrument helps to ensure that all the instruments will harmonize well with each other in the music they are about to produce.

Just as tuning to the oboe allows the instruments to resonate well with each other, so Lent offers the church community a season to tend to the way in which we resonate together in Christ. This image helps me to take in the seemingly paradoxical power of Lent, one that can draw us as church into union precisely by revealing to us those things that can easily drive us apart. Lent is not primarily about what we do as individuals. It is about helping us to face the reality of ourselves honestly and in tune with the healing presence of Christ in the midst of whatever pain or shame we may feel, and it's about doing all this in solidarity with each other.

What often prevents us from addressing the cacophony in our hearts is pain, whether the pain of knowing we have caused injury or the pain of the injuries done to us that may underlie our own problematic attitudes and behaviors. Such pain may prevent us from looking deeper into its root causes. We may slip into denial and even attempt to run away from the deeper reality behind what we do to hurt ourselves and others. Since such pain can run deep, we may need to face it gradually, and Lent provides us an entire season to focus on it.

Moreover, when confronted by our mistakes, we may feel a kind of shame that can lead to a sense of isolation from one another. Lent confronts us with the reality of our internal noise but not in order to humiliate us or isolate us. Lenten observance transforms acknowledgement of the mystery of sin from a source of isolation to a point of solidarity. Lent is the church's bold invitation to face reality and to draw support from Christ's compassionate and healing presence in our midst. The resulting dynamic is similar to that of meetings in the 12-step tradition of recovery from addictions. In those meetings, participants acknowledge their common struggle and resolve to rely on their higher power for help. For these participants as well as for the church during Lent, such shared honesty and commitment to grace provide a communal matrix for healing transformation.

Throughout Lent, the church invites us as community to intensify our efforts to listen honestly to our own hearts

and to the needs of those around us. We quiet down our attempts to distract ourselves from the difficult realities inside us, much like the instruments of the orchestra stop their cacophony in order to hear the oboe. The goal is not to leave us depressed about the problems in our lives or in our world, but to help us hear Christ's compassionate and healing presence seeking to resonate in both. As Christ's peace grows within us, our ability to attend generously to the needs of others also grows. Our Lenten observance allows us to hear the single note that is Christ's presence transforming us into a community whose lives can proclaim the joy of the Resurrection with the power and beauty of a symphony.

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Source URL (retrieved on *09/02/2015 - 20:27*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/spiritual-reflections/lenten-observance-transforms-us-cacophony-symphony