

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

We're only a few weeks beyond the Christmas season but I'm already preparing for Lent and Easter, seasons that demand a lot of planning ahead of time. The special daily Lenten prayer books we distribute have already arrived. I'm working on a theme for our parish Lenten practice and deciding on the inscription for the little pocket crosses we distribute at the beginning of Lent. I'm working on some ideas for a theme for my Lenten preaching and I just bought some beautiful new spring wreaths for the doors of the church for the Easter season. Soon we'll be asking you to bring old palm branches you might have at home so that we can burn them to make ashes for Ash Wednesday.

Preparing for Easter also means getting ready welcoming newcomers to the Catholic faith. This weekend at the Sunday 5:00 Mass we'll recognize three people who were baptized in other Christian churches and who are now seeking to enter into full communion with the Catholic Church this Easter. Chris Morse, Sylvia Sawyer and Phil Coffin have been preparing for this since the fall, meeting weekly with our initiation team: Elizabeth Smith, Pat Gomez, Arthur Alcaez, Kathy Robey and Denise Picard Lindgren.

Ash Wednesday is March 1 this year and though that's over a month away it's not too early to begin your own preparations for the Lenten season. Lent is a time of purification and penance: spring cleaning for the heart, the mind and the soul! What might you want and need to sweep out of your life this Lent? What bad habits need to be corrected with some Lenten discipline? Is there any trash in my life that needs to be cleaned out so that I might celebrate Easter with a renewed spirit? Those are just some "starter" questions to help you begin your remote planning for Lent and for an Easter filled the peace that comes only from the risen Jesus.

The second column on this page offers a prayer I wrote for my blog this past week. I post it here for all of us who are making our way through some difficult and divisive times in our lives as Americans.

Sincerely,
Fr. Fleming

A Prayer for America

Well, Lord, some of the hoopla is finally over and some of it's just beginning...
And what have we to offer you this morning?
Shall we lift up our hands in angry gestures?
Shall we send up a prayer
filled with cuss words and swears?
Shall we shout out our hate for those you love
- in spite of however they voted?
Shall we bless your name
as we curse our neighbor?
Shall we give you glory
while we swagger in our pride?
Shall we pray for relief
with a vengeful spirit?
Shall we render you praise
from spiteful hearts?
Shall we pray as if all hope were gone,
forgetting that you are our only hope?
Shall we put our faith in one like ourselves,
forgetting that only you can save?
Whether in anger or in celebration
we quickly forget that you alone are the Lord,
with power to heal and save us...
So we offer you our prayer this morning, Lord:
for the mending of America,
for the healing of our nation's soul,
for the calming of our country's spirit,
for justice done as you would have it,
for freedom tempered with sacrifice,
for liberty crowned with self-restraint,
for leadership tendered with humility,
for compassion in those who govern us,
for those who serve and protect us,
for truth in our words and deeds,
for integrity, unanimity and solidarity for all,
and for hearts wide open to welcome in
your tired, your poor, your huddled masses
yearning to be free...
We know this is a lot to ask, Lord,
and we know you ask us, in return,
to be instruments of your peace and grace.
Help us, Lord, to live through this time
according to your word and will
and make of us again
a people after your own heart.
Hear our prayer, O Lord,
and in your mercy answer us. Amen.