

A season for embracing the cross

As Christmas and its light fades from our memories we enter a period of reflection — the season of Lent.

On Ash Wednesday (Feb. 26) we begin a new journey of faith, a journey of spiritual renewal when we focus on the Passion of Christ and His death on the cross.

The cross is the principal symbol of the Christian faith. According to Scripture and the tradition of the Church, “God placed the salvation of the human race on the wood of the cross.”

Jesus’ death on the cross speaks to us about God’s love and mercy for His people. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus emphasizes the importance of the cross in the life of every disciple when He says: “If any want to become My followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow Me” (9:23). To live out the Christian faith means to embrace the cross as a way of life.

For persecuted Christians in some parts of the world, that means they risk losing their lives



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for the sake of the cross. Here in Canada, we enjoy freedom of religion. However, we may mistakenly see challenges, difficulties and inconveniences in our lives as being the crosses we carry.

Every year as we enter the season of Lent, we are enthusiastic to embark on a spiritual journey. Some people have thought about common practices of “what to give up” for Lent. This year, let us focus on how we as disciples can truly embrace the cross.

What does it mean to embrace the cross? Where do we start and how do we begin our journey of discernment to embrace the cross



A cross is marked on the forehead during Ash Wednesday, which marks the start of the Lenten season. The ashes symbolize both our mortality and the need for penance. (CNS photo/Adrees Latif, Reuters)

as followers of Jesus Christ? The celebration of Ash Wednesday with the ritual of distribution of ashes offers us a good starting point.

Why is it that we receive the ashes in the sign of the cross

marked on our foreheads? Do we wear the ashes with humble and contrite hearts? Do we wear the ashes to show others that we are Christians? The celebration of Ash Wednesday invites us to enter into the season of Lent.

Learning to embrace the cross may help us develop a positive attitude, to change from our former ways, to becoming spiritually closer to God.

A very important and popular spiritual exercise in parishes during Lent is praying the Stations of the Cross, traditionally held on Fridays. Whether we pray the Stations individually or as a parish community, the purpose is to pray to God to lead us into meditating on the suffering of Jesus Christ.

When we strive to pray the Stations of the Cross in Lent with gratitude, humility and a heart full of penitence, this spiritual exercise can be a source of inspiration as we spiritually journey with Christ to His death on the cross.

By meditating on the Stations, the events depicted in each of the Stations — such as the condemnation of Jesus, the carrying of the cross and the crucifixion — may help us examine our own journey in the light of Jesus’ journey to the cross.

Our Lenten discipline can lead us to learning how to forgive others, how to become selfless and how to be charitable. When we genuinely open ourselves with

contrite hearts to be transformed by the spirit of love of Christ, we can learn to live as people called to embrace the cross.

To embrace the cross does not call us to do what we might consider great and extraordinary things. In fact, as shown by the lives of the saints, to embrace the cross means committing ourselves in doing what is pleasing in the sight of God. This calls us to make sacrifices in our lives for the sake of others.

According to Pope Francis in his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (The Joy of the Gospel): “When we stand before Jesus crucified, we see the depth of His love which exalts and sustains us, but at the same time, unless we are blind, we begin to realize that Jesus’ gaze, burning with love, expands to embrace all His people” (268).

The season of Lent is a time to learn to embrace the cross so as to live as people of the cross. Just as St. Paul says that he “may never boast of anything except the cross of Christ” (Gal 6:14), we can also learn to boast of the cross from what we do for others. When we learn to carry our own cross, the spirit of God will help us make the love of Christ real and present in our communities.

May you have a spirit-filled Lenten season.

(Fr. Acheampong is pastor at Our Lady of Peace Parish in Toronto.)

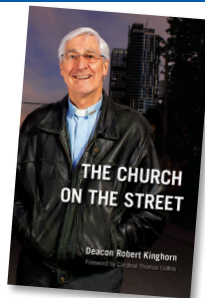
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The Church on the Street

By Deacon Robert Kinghorn

Foreword by Cardinal Thomas Collins

Award-winning columnist Deacon Robert Kinghorn invites readers to walk with him as he ministers in a Toronto neighbourhood of drugs, prostitution, violence and homelessness. In this compilation of his most poignant columns first published in *The Catholic Register*, Kinghorn vividly describes his street encounters and reveals not just the despair and disorder of the streets but also compassion and even hope.



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