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From time to time, I travel from home to lead retreats and parish missions or to give presentations to church ministers. My preparations for such trips include a lot of advance planning — making travel arrangements, preparing the presentations, coordinating mission details with the host parish — and prayer. Much prayer.

Closer to the date, I check the weather. The weather impacts what I choose to pack, what I choose to wear on the plane, and what jacket I'll throw into the suitcase "just in case." I always aim to travel light, trusting that I will have what I need for the journey.

One of my most memorable trips was to a diocese where I had been invited to give a workshop for diocesan musicians. I arrived safe and sound, but my carefully chosen and neatly packed clothes did not arrive with me. In fact, they did not arrive until the next evening, after the event ended, and just before I was scheduled to fly home. So I made the best of it, washed the clothes I had traveled in, and wore them — along with my tennis shoes — to give the presentation. I couldn't help but weave the tale of my travels into the work of the day. What church musician can't relate to the message of being prepared for anything and exhibiting grace and humor in every situation? We spent a marvelous day together singing, praying, laughing and dedicating ourselves anew to our shared ministry of song.

Just as we all have our rituals and ways of preparing for various travels, the days leading up to Ash Wednesday (March 6) are days we are meant to spend preparing for the Lenten journey. Now is the time to think about what you will need for this year's 40 days. More time for prayer? More quiet moments built into the day? A good devotional or spiritual book to challenge and inspire you? A saint to accompany you? Some time spent in conversation with a spiritual director or a spiritual companion? A retreat day or weekend? There are as many ways to prepare for this journey as there are people of God who together walk the 40 days to the celebrations of the Triduum and Easter.

As different as our Lenten journey plans may be, our beginning point is the same. When we gather on Ash Wednesday, we all hear the same call, the same invitation, proclaimed at the beginning of the first reading:

Even now, says the Lord, return to me with your whole heart, with fasting, and weeping, and mourning. Rend your hearts, not your garments, and return to the Lord, your God. (Joel 2:12,13)

And the Gospel defines for us the ways in which we are to answer that call to return to the Lord.

...[W]hen you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right is doing, so that your almsgiving may be secret (Matthew 6:3-4) ... when you pray, go to your inner room, close the door, and pray to your Father in secret. (6:6) ... When you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so that you may not appear to others to be fasting, except to your Father who is hidden. (6:17,18)

But why this call to return to the Lord? Why these disciplines of almsgiving, prayer and fasting? What does all of this lead us to? What is our destination? Certainly, we can take the long view and describe our destination as the heavenly kingdom; eternal life with God, Jesus, Mary and all the saints. Or like the prodigal son, we might describe our destination as home — and right relationships with our fathers, mothers, sisters and brothers. These are wonderful destinations!

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However, the answer to the questions, "Why this call?" and "Why these disciplines?" lies in what we do on Easter Vigil night and Easter Sunday morning. For then, at the end of our Lenten journey, we stand at the font and answer three questions:

1. Do you renounce sin, so as to live in the freedom of the children of God? — I do!
2. Do you renounce the lure of evil, so that sin may have no mastery over you? — I do!
3. Do you renounce Satan, the prince of sin? — I do!

This year, take extra care to prepare for the Lenten journey with the destination in mind. Spend some time leading up to Ash Wednesday praying about and thinking of ways you will honor the Lenten disciplines of almsgiving, prayer and fasting so that sin may be rooted out of your heart and out of your spirit, and so you will grow

stronger in resisting the temptations of Satan.

And when we all gather at the font at Easter, don't come wearing yesterday's outfit and your tennis shoes. Have the white garment ready, and profess wholeheartedly your faith in the Holy Trinity, the holy Catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting. Amen! Alleluia!

Editor's note: *This reflection was originally published in the February 2019 issue of [Celebration](#). Sign up to receive [daily Lenten reflections](#).*

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