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Editorial: The sign of Jonah

by NCR Editorial Staff

Editorial



Thomas Merton wrote in his early journals that the "sign of Jonas" -- the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection -- is "burned into the roots of our being." Sooner or later, everyone faces the universal truth that only through death to self do we find life. Merton embraced this sign and described himself as one like Jonah, because "I find myself traveling toward my destiny in the belly of a paradox."

Lent is upon us, and for Christians, accepting ashes in the form of a cross on our foreheads is one way we publicly wear this paradox, the sign of the cross, the sign of Jonah. If we look around, we might see many others sporting some form of sackcloth and ashes. These are other names for the effects of the global recession that is radiating outward from the implosion of the global financial markets, the paralysis of the banking system, and the sober, sinking feeling that government cannot, as yet, stop these seemingly out-of-control processes. It is likely to be a long, hard road ahead for everyone.

We are entering a crucial test of the resilience of all our social and civil contracts. For many people in the developed world, affluence that had become an extended Fat Tuesday is now a protracted Ash Wednesday they must newly share with the long-suffering developing world.

This crisis is touching us all, our jobs, our savings and our personal plans. It is also reminding us to grasp just how fragile and interdependent we are. There will be no going back to the way things were. We will emerge from this changed and chastened or not at all. Old systems built on the backs of the poor, on greed and fear, are crumbling. New systems that serve the common good, with new rules that are fairer and more enforceable, transparent and open, must emerge. What they will look like and how we will get there is the work of institutions and individuals, effective leadership and the common effort.

Lent is a good place to start, and this Lent overlaps with the beginning phase of what just might be an unexpected spiritual awakening for our world.

Ritual practices common to most major religions -- prayer, fasting and almsgiving -- at this moment are a part of the mix. And this is good. In crisis, prayer is less about personal piety than about surrender to God's sure hand in history, working through us to provide a meal for every hungry person, a bed for every homeless child, hope and care for one another.

Stories from the Great Depression about backyard gardens, communal meals, guest rooms, living simply and conserving everything, bartering and sharing, lending a hand -- these are authentic and ancient ways people have survived and flourished in hard times.

Why would we do this? What could motivate us to open ourselves up to the needs of others? For some of us it might be the sign of Jonah.

The sign we Catholics wear is our common destiny in the belly of paradox, where, if we trust its powerful promises, life will come from death and joy will rise again even from the ashes.

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