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Lent: The Absent \"Alleluia\"

Michael Sean Winters | Feb. 17, 2010 NCR Today

Augustine is a treasure trove of insights, into the nature of our faith as well as into human nature. But, one of his most significant contributions to Catholic theology was his insight that evil is an absence. This was how he resolved the age old question of how an all-powerful and benevolent God could permit evil. But, Augustine?s insight also tells us something about Lent. This is why we deprive ourselves of things.

For me, the greatest deprivation of Lent is the absence of the ?Alleluia? at Mass. That one word is, in its way, the central proclamation of our faith. It encapsulates the central proposition of Easter, bearing witness to the empty tomb, without which our faith is truly in vain. Its absence from our culture would leave us without so many great hymns, without Mozart?s great ?Exsultate,? without Tavener?s ?In Paradisum.? Its absence from the liturgy leaves a gaping hole.

Lent is about sitting with the prospect of that hole. The absence of the ?Alleluia? reminds us that there was a time before salvation was secured for us by the death and resurrection of the Master. It reminds us that, without Easter, we are merely dust, destined to return to dust, that we are wrong to expect justice or mercy or definitive love from these lives we live. It reminds us that, even today, we can close our hearts to the joy of that resurrection and to that fellowship with the Master that we call the Church. For the next forty days, I shall miss my ?Alleluia? and that experience of missing it is precisely what Lent is about.

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