

# Leading the FLOCK

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## “Lenten Pruning”

“I am the true vine and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch of mine that bears no fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes that it may bear more fruit” (Jn 15:1-2).

One Lent when I was a teenager, my Mom pointed out to my Dad that the firethorn bush on the side of our home had grown so much, it was out of control and the branches were so high they were tapping on the dining room window when it was windy. She asked him to trim that bush, which was producing fewer and fewer blossoms in the spring and thus fewer clumps of the red berries that followed. Now my dear Dad was no master gardener, and at that time there were no “YouTube” videos to watch to see how best to prune the firethorn. So, one Saturday, Dad went to work pruning the firethorn, and afterward proudly invited us to look at the result of his handiwork!

At the sight of it, my Mother gasped saying: “you’ve killed it!” It was so far cut back it didn’t seem it could ever grow back. “You wait and see,” Dad replied, “it will come back healthier and better than ever.” And indeed it did! As the years passed, it was amazing to me, but more so to my



Mother, that the firethorn which Dad had “hacked back” (translate pruned!), bore many more blossoms in the spring and far greater fruit, ever more numerous vibrant clumps of red berries. And then periodically, Lent after Lent, he would prune that firethorn, so it always remained beautiful, bearing fruit and delighting all who saw it.

In Lent we attend to pruning! This Lent, as every Lent, we are invited, better challenged, to allow the Lord to prune away! I invite you (and first myself) to cooperate with the grace of this Season, as we prepare to celebrate the Passion, Death and Resurrection of the Lord, and so to consciously and intentionally, and most of all humbly, work to prune from our lives those habits, words, attitudes, actions, relationships or judgments which bear no fruit in Christ. The pruning requires honesty, it can be

painful, it can be hard work on our part, it can be simple or radical, but the pruning is for a purpose: that I may remain as a living fruitful branch on the Vine who is Christ.

Lenten pruning principally takes shape through our

prayer, fasting and almsgiving, through the self-discipline and self-denial which, in a world of self-gratification, can seem foreign, odd, even radical. But prune we must if we are to remove those dead branches of our lives which need removing, the sinfulness and its residue which clings to us. We know what those branches are. And if we don't, we can ask the Lord and others to point them out to us.

What needs pruning in your life this Lent? Do you need to prune away the noise, the distractions, the clamor of social media? Do you need to prune away at a sharp tongue, foul language, judgmental speech? Do you need to prune away excess or possessions? Do you need to prune away a relationship which is divisive, inappropriate, detrimental to your relationship with the Lord and others? Do you need to prune away at self-righteousness, self-promotion, selfishness? Do you need to prune away at pride, covetousness, lust, anger, gluttony, envy or sloth? Such pruning will allow us, no matter the sins which need to be pruned, to surrender to the Lord's grace, live as more vibrant healthy disciples, ready to bear fruit for Him. Let the pruning begin!

The words of Jesus which follow the opening quote from John's Gospel make it abundantly clear that a branch cannot bear fruit by itself. But the one "who abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing" (Jn 15:5). And to what end? The "end" of garden pruning, if you will, is to make trees, shrubs, vines and bushes grow better, produce more fruit, to be more healthy, vibrant and alive! Jesus invites us to abide in him, like branches on the vine which is himself. Jesus tells us: the Father is glorified when we bear much fruit and prove to be his disciples. Allowing the Lord the freedom to prune away whatever in us is not

of him is for one purpose: "...that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be full" (Jn 15:12).

Called to "abide in him" this Lent, take advantage of the many ways that you can foster that "abiding," in your relationship with the Lord: frequent use of the Sacrament of Confession, quiet prayer at home or before the Blessed Sacrament, study and meditation on the Word of God, attending the Liturgies of Holy Week. And if we "put in the work" to abide in him, he will more fully abide in us, and so bear that fruit which Saint Paul calls the fruits of the Holy Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, charity, chastity, self-control. Such is the fruit which is the result of allowing him to prune us! This is the fruit he desires as a result of our Lenten practices, fruit which can and will enrich families, strengthen relationships, foster healing, bring about reconciliation, engender faithfulness and encouragement, invite and inspire others, and ultimately be so fruitful, that we are more healthy, vibrant and alive spiritually, that His joy may be in us, and our joy might be full!

The Collect for Mass from Monday of the Second Week of Lent, sums up nicely Lenten pruning: "O God, who have taught us to chasten our bodies for the healing of our souls, enable us we pray, to abstain from all sins, and strengthen our hearts to carry out your loving commands" (Roman Missal).



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