

As I was reflecting on the opportunities that the season of Lent usually provides, I recalled that in the past I would welcome this sacred time (or, perhaps I would call it an excuse or to have permission) to slow down, to pray more, to be in silence, to be more intentional in my attitude and behaviors, to go to my inner room and close the door as we heard in the Gospel of Matthew. During this past year of living in a pandemic, I recognize that we, as individuals and as a community, have been doing what St. Benedict instructs in Chapter 49 of the *Rule* when he wrote, “The life of a monk ought to be a continuous Lent” (RB 49:1).

During these past months we have definitely slowed down, increased our silence, reduced our exposure to outside distractions, denied ourselves particular food and drink, deepened our prayer, and been more intentional in our attitudes and behaviors within community. Each of us has had “something above the assigned measure to offer God of her own will with the joy of the Holy Spirit”, as we read in Chapter 49 of the *Rule* (RB 49:6). This past year we have been living in a sacred Paschal time. We have been experiencing either directly or indirectly the living and dying all around us. We have grieved with families near and far who have lost loved ones to COVID-19. We have celebrated the first responders who have modeled true sacrifice for us. We have stood helpless as we watched our political system falter and the moral fiber of our society become frayed. In the midst of being brokenhearted and wounded from the experiences of this past year, we have been called also to transformation. Our pandemic experience has not ended yet; together we continue to journey through this sacred time with hope and expectation as we look forward to the glory of the Resurrection, which is the goal of our Paschal experience of transformation.

Sisters, we have already spent a year following Benedict’s instruction to deny ourselves comforts and conveniences for the sake of the common good. This Lent, instead of adding more to the list of sacrifices, I invite you to willingly, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, observe our agreed upon Community Lenten Practices and our COVID-safety guidelines. I also ask you to spend time prayerfully reflecting on how you have been transformed by the experiences of this past year. What have you learned about yourself in this pandemic time? What have you learned about yourself in relation to God, to your sisters in community, and to the local or global communities? You **have** been changed (perhaps out of necessity), but have you opened yourself to being transformed? Lent really is about a journey of transformation, is it not? Isn’t it about moving from one way of being and doing to a new way of living in the light of Christ? By entering your inner room of self-reflection, you come to know and to be more your authentic self—the beloved daughter of God, the God who loves you unconditionally. This self-knowledge can lead you to peace and happiness and can empower you to bring the joyful hope and reassurance of God’s love to others.

This journey of transformation can be illustrated with the image of a door. By crossing the threshold of a door, we are moving from a known place or state of being to the unknown. We cannot experience what is beyond the door unless we freely choose to cross the threshold and open ourselves to the unknown.

As the author and psychiatrist Jean Shinoda Bolen shares, “Who we become, depends upon the choices we make. At particular times in our lives, really significant choices are made that shape our fate. When we are in a threshold time, what we decide to do determines what comes next.”

As individuals entering into this sacred season of Lent, hearing God say, “Return to me with your whole heart,” we are in a threshold time. As a community, intentionally listening for the needs of our time and discerning collectively the direction and purpose we need to take in addressing those needs, we are in a threshold time. As we prepare ourselves for living in a changed post-COVID reality, we are in a threshold time. Who we become, depends on the choices we make. What we decide to do determines what comes next.

The symbol of the door represents new life, birth, or passage from one place to another. Some doors represent hope, new opportunities, and abandoning the old and embracing the new. An open door may suggest welcome and invites curiosity and discovery. A closed door may represent separation and fear of the unseen or unknown, which can lead to worry and uncertainty. A closed door may also represent passage into an interior room where we grow in self-knowledge as we encounter the heart of God.

It is the gift of grace that gives us the strength and courage to face our doors and freely choose to take that first step to move us beyond where we are now. In Joyce Rupp’s book *Open the Door*, Gail Jolley shares, “That is a good first step, but eventually it must go further if it is to do any of us any good. It must lead to love and acceptance of others, to the recognition that our well-being is connected to the well-being of others.” Joyce Rupp adds, “The more we open the door to our depths and learn from what we find there, the greater spiritual richness we are able to bring to others.”

When we first entered the door of this community, we chose freely to cross a threshold and enter fully into our communal life. Crossing the threshold into community, we let go of the known and embraced the unknown, opening ourselves to new opportunities. The door that was first opened to us is significant because it led to the public space of the whole community, not to our individual rooms. Perhaps we entered through the front door that opened into the main hall of the monastery. Perhaps we entered through the chapel door that opened into our communal place of worship. Entering first into the midst of the community is a reminder to all of us that it is through our communal way of life that we are shaped, transformed, and led to a deeper knowledge of self and others. Because of this lived experience, we are then able to enter into our inner room, close the door, and grow in our relationship with our God. It is through this openness to God’s love that we experience our connectedness with all of God’s creation.

Sister Maria Cimperman, a member of the Religious of the Sacred Heart of Jesus congregation, and author of the book *Religious Life for our World: Creating Communities of Hope*, writes, “There is a basic truth about change: we’ve got to give ourselves to it. Growth will not happen without moving on from who we now are. Each day God calls us to stretch a little further, search a little deeper,

and become a little freer. The Holy One becomes the door providing safe passage and clearance to what lies ahead in the journey to wholeness.”

We hear St. Paul say to us as he did in his second letter to the Corinthians (6:2b), “Now, is a very acceptable time...” Now is a very acceptable time to reflect on our threshold moments and intentionally choose to cross the threshold into new life with the Risen Christ. That is the goal of this sacred journey of transformation.

Through our fidelity to our monastic way of life we continue to be transformed daily. May the grace of God give us the strength, courage, and perseverance to turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel.