

Questions from the Inquiry Period

- 1. How can some denominations teach that if you don't belong to our group, you aren't going to heaven? (Dan)*
- 2. Do we all have to strive to go to heaven? (Lynn)*

*I strongly urge you to attend our Lenten Study Classes on Friday nights in Lent, where this topic will be directly addressed. If you cannot do so, pick up and read Rob Bell's **LOVE WINS: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived**. I also have a few books available to purchase for \$11.69. (If you order from Amazon now, the price has dropped, so you can get it a bit cheaper.) There is a book and two sets of CDs in our parish library.*

In the Preface to LOVE WINS, Rob Bell writes:

“A staggering number of people have been taught that a select few Christians will spend forever in a peaceful, joyous place called heaven, while the rest of humanity spends forever in torment and punishment in hell with no chance for anything better. It’s been clearly communicated to many that this belief is a central truth of the Christian faith and to reject it is, in essence, to reject Jesus.”

“This is misguided and toxic and ultimately subverts the contagious spread of Jesus’ message of love, peace, forgiveness, and joy that our world desperately needs to hear.

“And so this book.”

There is a tendency in some circles of Christians to put all the focus on “getting into heaven” when one dies. They tend to interpret the Bible in a very individualistic and otherworldly way. Their view of the Bible sees it as ‘an evacuation plan for the next world’, to use Brian McLaren’s phrase—and just for their group.

Again, Rob Bell writes:

“And whenever people claim that one group is in, saved, accepted by God, forgiven, enlightened, redeemed—and everybody else isn’t—why is it that those who make this claim are almost always part of the group that’s ‘in’? Have you ever heard people make claims about a select few being the chosen and then claim that they’re not part of that group?”

In a 1997 interview of evangelist Billy Graham by televangelist Robert Schuller of the “Hour of Power,” the conversation was surprisingly broader than some Christians imagined it should be:

Graham: . . . I think everybody that loves Christ, or knows Christ, whether they're conscious of it or not, they're members of the Body of Christ. And I don't think that we're going to see a great sweeping revival that will turn the whole world to Christ at any time. I think James answered that, the Apostle James in the first council in Jerusalem, when he said that God's purpose for this age is to call out a people for His name. And that's what God is doing today.

“He’s calling people out of the world for His name, whether they come from the Muslim world or the Buddhist world or the Christian world or the nonbelieving world, they are members of the Body of Christ, because they’ve been called by God. They may not even know the name of Jesus, but they know in their hearts that they need something that they don’t have, and they turn to the only light that they have, and I think that they are saved, and that they’re going to be with us in heaven.”

Schuller: *What I hear you saying is that it's possible for Jesus Christ to come into human hearts and souls and lives, even if they've been born in darkness and have never had exposure to the Bible. Is that a correct interpretation of what you're saying?*

Graham: Yes, it is, because I believe that. I've met people in various parts of the world in tribal situations who have never seen a Bible or heard about a Bible and never heard of Jesus, but they've believed in their hearts that there was a God, and they've tried to live a life that was quite apart from the surrounding community in which they lived.

Schuller: *I'm so thrilled to hear you say this.
There's a wideness in God's mercy.*

Graham: *There is. There definitely is.*

But we make His love too narrow
By false limits of our own;
And we magnify His strictness
With a zeal He will not own.

(There's a Wideness in God's Mercy, Frederick Faber, 1814-1863)

In his book, “How God Became King: The Forgotten Story of the Gospels,” N.T. Wright notes:

“The first inadequate answer is that Jesus came to teach people how to go to heaven. This is, I believe, a major and serious misunderstanding.”

(He then goes into this at length...)

*If you would like to explore this topic more,
please come to our Friday Lenten Classes!*

I think that what we have just said also addresses in part Terry's and Carol Ann's questions:

• If God is the God of all Creation, why does our Christian faith teach that Jesus is the ONLY way? (Carol Ann)

• Why is the only way to God through Christ? (Terry)

I think both these questions raise a very important issue. Carol Ann asks, “*Why does **OUR CHRISTIAN FAITH TEACH** that Jesus is the only way?*” (Terry asks basically the same thing.)

The assumption behind this question is that there is a universally agreed-upon “Christian Faith” that teaches one way of believing. And in the United States, that ‘way of believing’ is assumed to be an interpretation of Christianity that is for Catholics influenced by a pre-Vatican II Catechism (salvation is through the Church and Sacraments),

...or for Protestants dominated by a Reformed Calvinist/Evangelical interpretation. This assumption – that if you are a Christian, then of course you must believe one way – is one of the most damaging assumptions, in my opinion, of our world today (and not just for Christians, either). Let me state it as strongly as I can:

*There is NOT one, universally-accepted
interpretation of the Christian Faith
or of the Bible.*

As I said, the assumption that there is, in my opinion, has done immeasurable damage to the Church and to Christianity as a whole. There are millions of people out there who have rejected Christianity and will have nothing to do with Church because they ASSUME that all Christians must believe things about God, heaven, hell, punishment, etc. which they could never believe. Rob Bell notes that when he has discussions with such people, he quickly discovers that HE doesn't believe in that God or that Jesus, either.

Here is an example of the kind of “doctrinal purity” that many today demand. This popped up on a recent web search. It is from a Christian blogger by the name of Mike Duran, and it concerns Pastor Duran’s opinion of C.S. Lewis:

Somehow, Lewis' "checkered pedigree" has become of little concern to the average evangelical admirer. Nevertheless, some have described his Christianity as a "myth" and John Robbins goes so far as to ask, [Did C.S. Lewis Go to Heaven?](#) In his essay, Robbins concludes, "So we ask again: 'Did C.S. Lewis go to Heaven?' And our answer must be: 'Not if he believed what he wrote in his books and letters.'"

One needn't go far to find similar screeds against anyone who doesn't toe the line of "what Christians believe".

It seems that there are a lot of folk out there who are certain as to who is NOT going to heaven. Just Google the word "apostate".

If this is the viewpoint that millions of people think is "What Christians Believe", is it any wonder they would never darken the door of a church?

If these millions of people could be made to realize that the message of Jesus Christ is FAR better, more hopeful, more loving, more inclusive than the widely-assumed “This is what the Christian Faith believes”, then they’d come flocking to the Church!

I truly believe that.

There have always been faithful, devout, loving Christians who believe different things, interpret the Bible in very different ways, understand “salvation”, heaven, hell, the sacraments and doctrines in different ways.

There are many groups of Christians who don't believe “salvation” is primarily about “going to heaven when you die” (I am among them).

Richard Rohr describes the understanding of St. Francis and his fellow Franciscans as an “alternative orthodoxy” which, though it deviates significantly from the officially-taught Roman Catholic doctrine in some places, has always been accepted by the official Roman Church as an alternative way of understanding the Catholic faith.

We could do much to draw people to God as reflected in Jesus Christ if we could communicate to the masses that what “the Christian Faith teaches” is not monolithic, but rich and varied and alive and open to questioning.

The word “orthodoxy” means “right belief”.

*This is contrasted with the word “orthopraxy”,
which means “right practice”.*

On his website, Richard Rohr writes:

“Alternative orthodoxy” is a phrase that the Franciscan tradition has applied to itself. At its core, the alternative orthodoxy is an “orthopraxy” believing that lifestyle and practice are much more important than mere verbal orthodoxy.

(“life is more important than doctrine,” says Thomas Aquinas)

Jesus tells a parable about two brothers who received instructions from their father. One brother said, "I'll do what you say, father," but he didn't do it. The other said, "I won't do it, father," but then turned around and did it. Jesus commends the second. His words were not right, but his actions were! He tells this parable against the Pharisees, who believed all the right things, but didn't act lovingly.

--Matthew 21:28-32

Jesus did not see the Kingdom of God as something that will only come in the future, but as something that is at hand here and now.

So in (partial) answer to Lynn's question, there are a lot of Christian leaders who see heaven as a type of life available to us NOW, and not just in some future Age. A lot of us don't erect a huge barrier between "Heaven Now" and "Heaven Then". As Richard Rohr often states, "It's Heaven all the way to Heaven, and Hell all the way to Hell."

Christianity is just Christ—nothing more and nothing less. It is a way of life, and He is that way. It is the truth about human destiny, and He is that truth. It is the offer of life lived in the sunshine of eternal love, and He is that life.

... [R. J. Campbell](#) (1867-1956)

“Thus if you have really handed yourself over to Him, it must follow that you are trying to obey Him. But trying in a new way, a less worried way. Not doing these things in order to be saved, but because He has begun to save you already. Not hoping to get to Heaven as a reward for your actions, but inevitably wanting to act in a certain way because a first faint gleam of Heaven is already inside you.”

— C.S. Lewis, Mere Christianity

Next Question:

*If a rich man cannot go to heaven
unless he gets rid of everything,
what does that mean for some rich
people who do good? (Earline)*

Luke 18:18-23

A certain ruler asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: 'You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; Honor your father and mother.'" He replied, "I have kept all these since my youth." When Jesus heard this, he said to him, "There is still one thing lacking. Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." But when he heard this, he became sad; for he was very rich.

The 10 Commandments comprise four commandments having to do with our relationship with God, and 6 having to do with our relationships with each other. They are often depicted as two tablets: the first with the 4 Commandments regarding God, the second with the 6 Commandments regarding our relationships with each other.

I

Thou shalt have no other gods before me.

II

Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image.

III

Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain.

IV

Remember the sabbath day to keep it holy. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day. Wherefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day, and hallowed it.

V

Honour thy father and thy mother.

VI

Thou shalt not kill.

VII

Thou shalt not commit adultery.

VIII

Thou shalt not steal.

IX

Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor.

X

Thou shalt not covet anything that is thy neighbor's.

Jesus tells the ruler, "You know the commandments: You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; Honor your father and mother." He replied, "I have kept all these since my youth." Jesus has listed only the commandments having to do with relationships with each other – BUT, he has left one out! Which one?

The one about not coveting – which was exactly this man’s issue. Jesus the divine physician diagnoses our illnesses immediately, and brings them to light so that they can be dealt with, treated, maybe eventually cured.

For others of us, the main issue may not be coveting, but something else.

I personally believe that it is our relationship to money that is key.

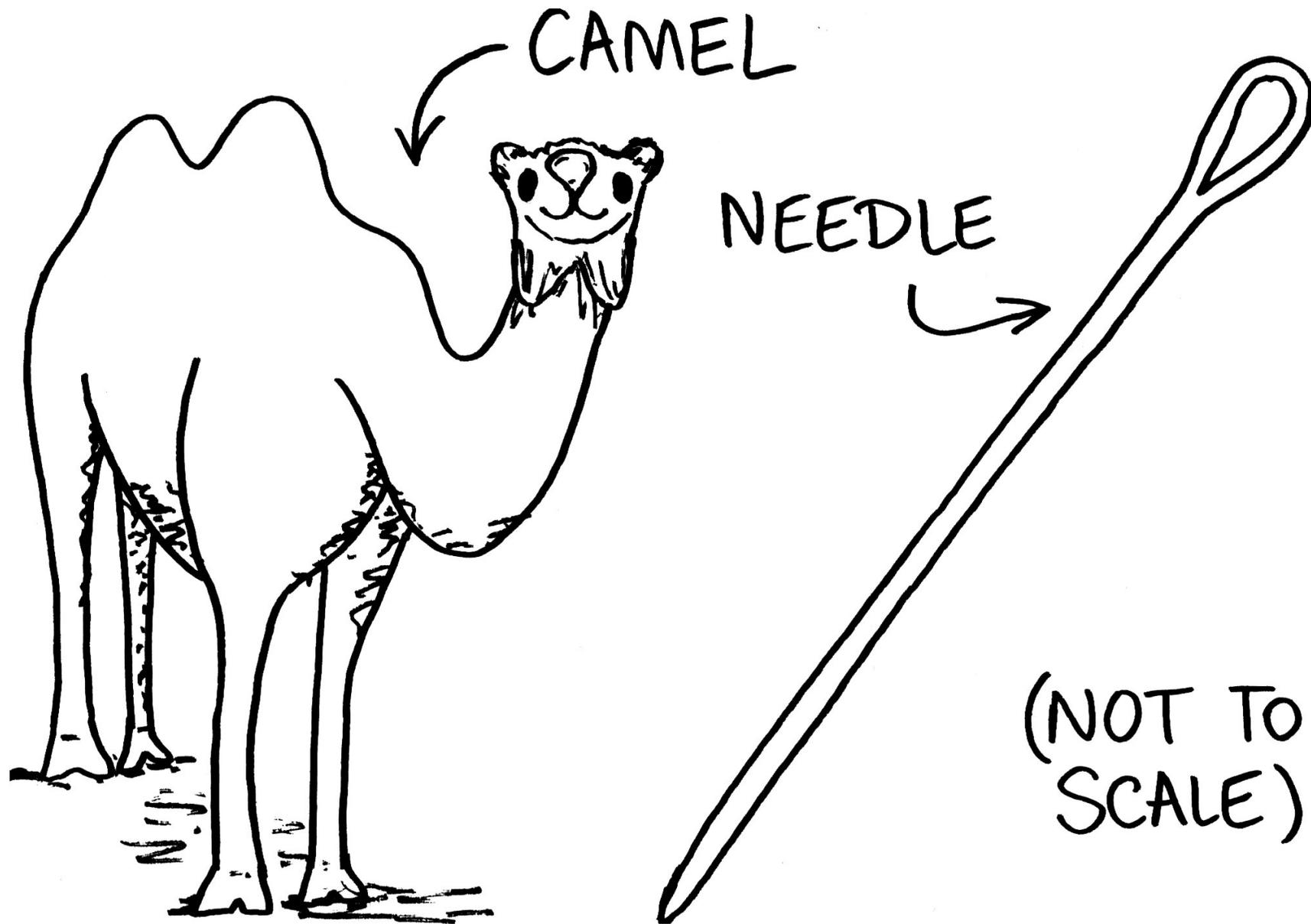
Are we being “radically generous” with it?

Do we have money, or does it have us?

Are we like Scrooge before he sees the ghosts or after?

I know some people who are able to have a significant amount of money, are extremely generous with it, use it for God's purposes, and are not possessed by their possessions.

But Jesus makes it clear that this is a difficult road! When he says, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God” (in my view, a hyperbolic image), he is not saying it’s impossible; only that it is exceedingly difficult to have possessions without them having you. It takes living firmly in the Spirit and Grace of God. As Jesus says at the end of the “eye of the needle” story, “With humans, it is impossible; but with God, all things are possible.”



CAMEL

NEEDLE

(NOT TO SCALE)



LENT

Next Question:

What are the origins of the Seasons of the Church Year – Advent, Lent, Pentecost, etc. What are the practices of these seasons and what do the words “Advent”, “Lent”, etc. mean? (Debi)

The season of Lent has as its pattern Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness, tempted by Satan. Some Christians (I among them) believe that during this time, Jesus not only faced the demons which all of us face, but he also clarified his identity and call. This is a primary focus for Lent: to face our temptations, demons, shadow side, "wild animals", and to clarify and hone our true identity, our True Self in God – all the while being ministered to by angels!

This discernment of one's identity in God and calling from God naturally leads to a desire to commit or recommit oneself to God. We have seen how, from the first centuries of the Christian Church, Lent became a time of preparation for Baptism. This Baptismal focus was renewed by Vatican II with the renewal of the ancient Catechumenate, on which [The Faith-Seeking Journey](#) is based. This [Initiation Period](#) which we enter next Sunday leads us to a recommitment of our Baptismal Vows at the Great Vigil of Easter.

Origin of the word “Lent”

In the late Middle Ages, as sermons began to be given in the vernacular instead of Latin, the English word Lent was adopted in place of the Latin or Greek words previously used for this season – words meaning “40”. In Old English, “Lengten” meant “Spring” (as in the German language Lenz and Dutch lente) and derives from the Germanic root for “long” because in the spring the days visibly lengthen.

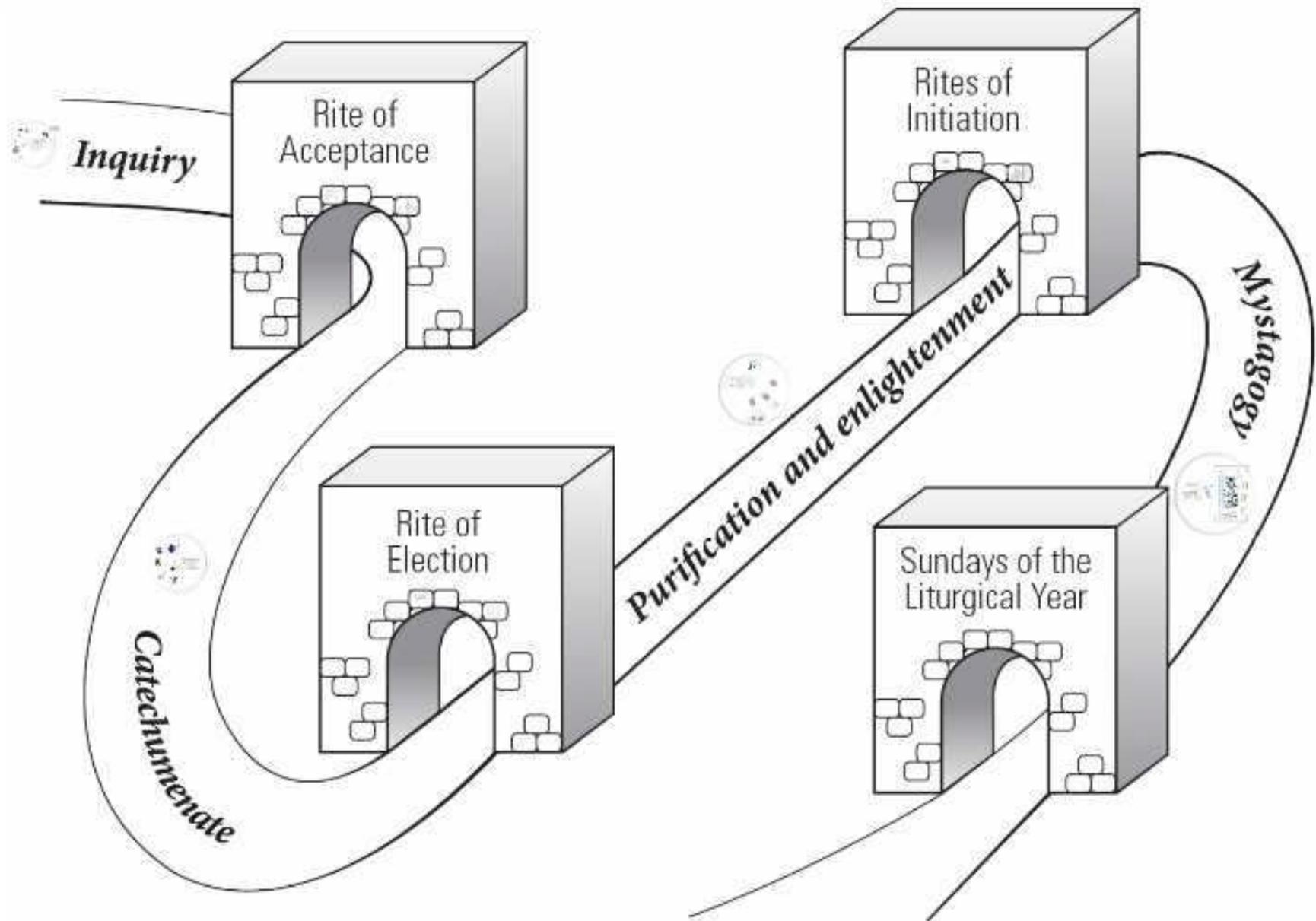
It is certain from the "Festal Letters" of St. Athanasius that in A.D. 331 he enjoined upon his flock a period of forty days of fasting preliminary to, but not inclusive of, the stricter fast of Holy Week, and secondly that in 339 Athanasius, after having traveled to Rome and over the greater part of Europe, wrote in the strongest terms to urge this observance upon the people of Alexandria as one that was universally practiced, "to the end that while all the world is fasting, we who are in Egypt should not become a laughing-stock as the only people who do not fast but take our pleasure in those days".

Our Prayer Book, in the Ash Wednesday service, says:

Dear People of God: The first Christians observed with great devotion the days of our Lord's passion and resurrection, and it became the custom of the Church to prepare for them by a season of penitence and fasting. This season of Lent provided a time in which converts to the faith were prepared for Holy Baptism. It was also a time when those who, because of notorious sins, had been separated from the body of the faithful were reconciled by penitence and forgiveness, and restored to the fellowship of the Church.

Thereby, the whole congregation was put in mind of the message of pardon and absolution set forth in the Gospel of our Savior, and of the need which all Christians continually have to renew their repentance and faith.

I invite you, therefore, in the name of the Church, to the observance of a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God's holy Word.



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