

# One cannot walk with Jesus and be unchanged



**A**s the woman made her way forward for Holy Communion, a small white pin on her jacket flickered as it reflected the light above. The text it carried and the figure of Jesus and the cross beside it, all spoke to a moment emblazoned in her heart.

As she received the Lord in the Eucharist, she stood at the beautiful intersection of faith and action.

As a priest, I have seen many pins on many jackets over the years. Some pins are old classics like the “Jesus is the Reason for the Season” neatly surrounded by Christmas holly. Others, like the baby footprint pins, quietly witness the dignity of life.

The pin the woman wore and the thousand like it in our parish were different in that they told a story — not only of Jesus’ gift of self on the cross but also of a priest’s challenge and a parish’s response.

Last year for Lent, we decided to try something different. Perhaps it was a stroke of genius, or perhaps it was because we were out of ideas.

Whatever the case may be, at the start of Lent, I rose to the pulpit and declared, “If I could only have one thing as a priest in the parish, it would not be money, but rather to have the entire parish attend all of the services of Holy Week and the Sacred Triduum (Holy Thursday, Good Friday and the Easter Vigil).”

Speaking passionately, I asked, “What would happen if just once we all came, for the whole Triduum? What would happen if we stopped simply talking about Jesus and truly walked with Him?” After Mass that Sunday, we had volunteers at all the doors, handing out pins to those willing to take the challenge and make the commitment.

The little white pins that adorned 1,000 jackets not only depicted Jesus carrying the cross, but they also had a series of footprints behind him and the words, “I am walking with Jesus — Lent 2023.”

During the following weeks, we continued to not only invite but also to directly challenge the parish. We stepped away from focusing on giving up cookies for Lent and instead leaned in hard, encouraging people to be bold, to commit, to act.

We challenged parents to take kids out of school on Good Friday and to pull them from practices and games throughout the Triduum.

Realizing this would be new to many people, we prepared personalized letters for the teachers and coaches of every young person in our parish community. These explained the upcoming absence of their child for religious observances and politely reminded them of their obligation to accommodate this request without prejudice.

We asked parishioners to take off from work on Good Friday and provided notes for employers, appropriately helping people understand their legal right to religious accommodation in places of employment.

As Holy Week drew near, we had no way of knowing if people would take the challenge and be bold. We knew the little white pins, which started as a Lenten advertising idea, were popping up everywhere.

The cashiers at Market Basket had seen so many come through the lines they began to ask parishioners about them. Several local employers, including a furniture store, decided to close on Good Friday. They were inspired by the challenge, not simply to talk about Jesus, but to walk with Him, to be with Him in these most holy days.

Twenty minutes before the Mass of the Lord’s Supper on Holy Thursday, the Church was full. By the time Mass started, the seats were all taken and people were standing in the aisles and crowding the entrances.

What followed over the next few days was truly remarkable. Hundreds gathered for the Stations of the Cross in the cemetery, Veneration of the Cross, Seven Last Words of Christ, carrying the statue of Jesus to the tomb and the glorious Easter Vigil.

The parish came — the entire parish.

Long gone were the modest crowds of the most devout, replaced by the entire parish who came with a faith that to this day moves my heart. For Jesus, we came together as one parish community — building a beautiful bond and deeper faith.

I do not know what Holy Week 2024 will bring. What I do know is that for three days last year, Jesus was so very close to us and we were close to Him. The pin remained a simple symbol of the power of putting faith into action, for one cannot walk with Jesus and be unchanged. ■



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