

Lenten Journey in a Brown Paper Bag

By Rev. Joseph G. Healey, M.M.

One day a Catholic man of Iramba Parish in Musoma Diocese in Western Tanzania named James Onyango planned to go far away to work. He was going to Rusumo in Ngara District in Kagera Region during the month of January to help build a new road through an uninhabited area. Since the work camp was located in a desolate place James knew that he would not be able to pray in a church. Therefore he asked the priest at Iramba to help him to pray especially during the coming Lenten season, the months of February, March and April.

The priest gave James Onyango a brown paper bag containing various signs and symbols of the Lenten season. He advised James to use these signs and symbols to pray every Sunday and on the big feasts of the 40-day Lenten period.

Then James left Iramba. When he reached Rusumo he began to use the signs and symbols in his paper bag -- each Sunday until Easter Sunday. On the big feast of Easter itself James sat outside his house in the work camp. When he began to unpack the symbols of Lent in his paper bag his friend Marwa came by to greet him.

Marwa asked, "James what are you doing? Why have you been using these signs and symbols even up to today? James answered: "Our Christian tradition is to make a spiritual journey of 40 days in this season called Lent. Therefore my brown paper bag has different signs and symbols for each week of this journey. Here at Rusumo there is no church so I use these symbols to help me to pray and to understand better the meaning of this Lenten period." Marwa broke in, "Oh, this is very interesting. Explain more."

Onyango said, "Fine. Our Lenten spiritual journey began on Ash Wednesday in the middle of February." He took out a small jar of ashes from his paper bag. "These ashes are the first symbol -- to remember penance and fasting." Then James took out all the symbols one by one and explained to Marwa the meaning of each one as follows:

"Sand" -- for the First Sunday of Lent

"Stones" -- Second Sunday of Lent

"Cord" -- Third Sunday of Lent

"Candle" -- Fourth Sunday of Lent

"Maize and Millet Seeds" -- Fifth Sunday of Lent

"Palm Branches" -- Palm Sunday

"Towel" -- Holy Thursday

"Cross" -- Good Friday

"Water" -- Holy Saturday

"White Cloth" -- Easter Sunday

"You see," said James, "all these symbols are explained in the *Bible* readings for the main feasts of Lent. For example, this white cloth symbolizes the white robe of the angel who told the women at the tomb that Jesus Christ has risen from the dead. Today on Easter Sunday we use the story of Christ's resurrection from St.

John's
Gospel.

Marwa exclaimed, "Why these are symbols from our daily life -- sand, seeds, water, a cloth. I always thought Christianity was a foreign religion with a lot of strange ideas from Europe." "You would be surprised, Marwa," said James, "now Christianity is being Africanized. The last time I was in Iramba one of the catechists was talking about Jesus as our "Eldest Brother," as a "Healer," as the "Victor over Death." I felt Jesus was not a foreigner but one of us Africans."

"James," exclaimed Marwa, "you've given me some new ideas. I have a lot to think about now."

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