



Bishop Hicks' Column

April 2022 | Lenten pruning leads to Easter glory



Recently, I stopped by a big home improvement store. The garden center was bustling with people shopping for flowers and plants. Happily, I sighed and thought, "Ah, spring is in the air!"

One of my favorite images in the Bible is that of the garden. It not only reminds us that we reap what we sow. But also, it all begins in the Garden of Eden with the creation of Adam and Eve and then their eventual fall from grace. Jesus experiences deep prayer, agony and betrayal in the Garden of Gethsemane before his crucifixion. At the resurrection, Mary Magdalene is the first to see the risen Christ, but she does not recognize him, "supposing him to be the gardener" (John 20:15). Throughout Scripture, gardens are a place to encounter the mystery of God. They are places of suffering, death and most importantly, new life.

Saying all this, let me acknowledge that I do not have a naturally green thumb. I admire people who possess that gift. Regardless, I am starting to dabble in some basic gardening.

At the bishop's residence in Joliet where I live, I have made the decision to have some large trees cut down in my backyard. The reason I am having them removed is not because I am "anti-tree." On the contrary, I love trees. However, there are so many in my backyard, that they have created a canopy over the yard through which no sunlight can penetrate. As a result, instead of grass, my backyard is basically a plot of dirt that, when it rains, turns into a muddy mess and at worst a swamp. As we remove a few of the trees, my hope is that the sun may shine through the remaining ones and that grass, flowers and plants may return to sprout, grow and flourish.

Scripturally, Jesus reminds us that gardens need to be pruned so that they may produce fruit: "He prunes it so that it may bear more fruit" (John 15:3). In the Catholic Church, spiritual pruning is not a negative exercise. Instead, it helps our spiritual

growth by removing whatever inhibits or prevents us from growing in healthy and holy ways.

Perhaps that is a good way to look at these past 40 days. Lent provides us the time to cut down and prune some things in our lives that prevent God's light from shining on and through us. We do so, specifically during Lent, with our acts of penance, prayer and almsgiving.

Continuing this theme of gardening around my house, late last fall I planted over 50 tulip bulbs around the statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary. After I planted them, I have constantly wondered, "Did the squirrels dig them up and eat them?" "Will they blossom and what color will they be?" "Will the Blessed Mother enjoy them?" Every day, I find myself eagerly awaiting these tulips to colorfully burst through the soil.

This is an act of hope! While I still cannot see the flowers, I eagerly anticipate their arrival. We, too, wait with faith and hope to celebrate the resurrection of our Lord and savior at Easter and boldly proclaim that he is not dead. He is not still in the ground. He is risen!

The lingering question is, "Why do we spend time at garden centers and in our own gardens, planting and caring for flowers and plants?" It is partially because they are tangible signs of beauty, hope and life. As St. Alphonsus Liguori rightly noted, "When we see a beautiful garden, or a beautiful flower, let us think that there we behold a ray of the infinite beauty of God, who has given existence to that object."

As we come to the end of this Lenten time of pruning in our own spiritual gardens, let us approach Easter with great joy and enthusiasm. In other words, with springtime hope, let us continue to search for and bask in the risen life of Christ, for he truly fills our world and lives with light, beauty and new life. ✝