During this past week, some family members and friends emailed me that they had seen on TV and the internet some videos and still photos of Niagara Falls frozen. Of course, the Falls never stop flowing or falling, but the wind-whipped mist creates 150 foot high mountains of ice directly in front of the Falls, and coats with ice all the trees and rocks in the path of the mist. I wrote back to family members and friends, “Yes, I have seen that event many times. I’ve lived here for twenty-plus years. The experience is spectacular.”

Yesterday, I accidentally took myself to the Falls. I was doing some errands downtown, and happened to be just a stone’s throw away from the state park so I decided to drive to the Falls. As I entered the parking lot to view the Falls, I noticed that a steady stream of other people had the same idea. After I had parked my car, I joined a throng of hundreds of other curiosity-seekers, tourists, and may I dare say, pilgrims, streaming towards the Falls. This throng included young people, old people like me, and toddlers dressed in snowsuits that made them look and walk like young sumo wrestlers. We all wanted to see this anticipated spectacular sight.

It was not easy to get to Terrapin Point. In zero temperatures which felt like -15 with the wind chill factor, we trudged our way along snow-covered pathways and occasionally climbed three or four foot high piles of snow to reach our destination. Once having arrived there, ... people stood in awe. Ice glistened everywhere! It was like standing inside a gigantic Crystal bubble. The Ice Palace extended for a quarter mile in every direction. Nobody spoke. This was a spiritual experience. ... Young couples, and not so young couples, dressed like Eskimos in their cumbersome parkas, just held each other around the waist. This was a romantic experience. ... Silence reigned; it was like being in church. This was a sacred experience. ... People contemplated the beauty, the power and the majesty of the Falls. This was a religious experience. ... Personally, I thanked God for what he has wrought. He created a once-little Niagara River on its current course about 10,000 years ago, at the end of the most recent Ice Age. The river has carved a path eight miles long through rock two hundred feet deep, gradually but relentlessly upriver, on average three feet per year. How great is the power and the grandeur of God!

This experience can serve as a metaphor for Christians’ Lenten experience. The goal of Lent is a deeper experience of identification and union with Jesus. The means employed in Lent are the classical methods of prayer, fasting, sacrifice and service. As I had been walking towards the Falls, I kept asking people returning from the Falls, “How was it?” Almost everybody said the same thing, “Cold, and very pretty.” “Cold, and beautiful.” “Cold, and spectacular.” To experience the Falls in winter, and especially in this winter, requires sacrifice, but the end point is worthwhile. We slogged our way through snow and ice in sub-freezing temperatures, while walking into the unending piercing mist.
Once people had arrived at the Falls, they forgot about the sacrifice they had endured to get there. They simply stood in silent awe.

You and I, as we experience these first few days of Lent 2015, we are making sacrifices of extra prayer and fasting. These actions represent a means to an end. The end is the awesome experience of entering more deeply into the life of Jesus. Our well intentioned sacrificing draws us imperceptibly into closer identity and union with Jesus. Our extra praying leads us deeper into the heart of Jesus, who sought always to do the will of the Father in heaven. Our Lenten experience of prayer and sacrificing is a process. It requires time and effort. It takes weeks; many times along this journey, we take two steps forward and one step backward, but we are generally moving forward. Prayer and sacrifice are the means. Union with Jesus is the goal. Keeping Lenten practices of fasting on Ash Wednesday and abstaining from meat on Fridays and doing other good works will make us happy. Happiness results from achieving good goals by good means. Achieving any good goal by good means will make us happy. But meeting Jesus more intimately, in silence, in contemplation which results in deeper union with Jesus will make us joyful. Joy is the emotional response to the experience of harmony.

As we proceed through Lent, let’s keep our eye on the prize: deeper relationship with Jesus through practicing works of prayer and fasting. Most of us have experienced many Lenten seasons; we’ve been down this road before. What is different is not God who beckons us, but we who are a year older, wiser and deeper, please God. Over the years, we are drawing closer to Jesus. The mist gradually is lifting and we see more clearly what is to be seen. And we stand in awe. Silently, happily, joyfully.

Just like the people returning from having viewed the Falls, we say, “It took a lot of sacrifice to get there, but it’s beautiful, it’s worth it, it’s awesome.”