

Lent Gives Us a Chance to Focus on What Matters Most

This Wednesday, we begin our journey through the season of Lent with the imposition of ashes. As they are placed on our foreheads, we are invited to repent and believe in the Gospel, and are also reminded that from dust we came, and to dust we shall return.

These kinds of things are very counter-cultural if you think about it. We sometimes can get focused on the here and now only, so our lives can easily revolve around our schedule or be very short-term as we put our priorities into being a busy-body or materialism. But the stark reality is for all that we put our energy into, it lasts but a moment, and there is no getting around the reality that we indeed return to ashes one day.

The joy though for the Christian is that is not the end of the story. The ashes symbolize something that once was; we though always will be. But while our earthly bodies turn to dust, our bodies are also glorified through the resurrection. However, the invitation to follow Jesus does require a response too. Jesus always gives us an invitation, and does not force Himself upon us. Hopefully we want to respond to that invitation and not stand before Him at the judgement and say “well, I sure was awfully busy with my job and hobbies, and I managed to get a nice house in the end” but have a conversation with our Lord about the good things that we did with our life to love Him and others, and also learn how if there are any final steps we need to take how His love will make that possible.

This wonderful season of Lent gives us the time to take some of those steps as we grow closer to Him. It shouldn't be a season of just thinking of “stuff to give up” and abstaining from meat on Friday, but a true season of growth.

With respect to fasting, consider fasting from things that can take up our time and distract us from God and one another. Sometimes there are things we enjoy that maybe aren't out of control, but we recognize perhaps we spend too much time on. It could be video games, going to the casino, going to the mall or movies, eating too much fatty foods/sweets, etc. If you do decide to give something up, how about being constructive with it? For instance, if one gives up going to the movies on Friday, maybe that money for the ticket could instead be given to the needy, or the time could be given to spend time with your family members. Ultimately the good that comes from fasting from something allows us to look back after Lent ends and be in a better spot to use the virtue of temperance to keep our appetites under control.

Other times there are “spiritual fats” that we consume that would be best removed entirely, such as sins we have fallen into or bad habits such as gossiping, being condescending or impatient, or other sins. I once read a story from a dad who wrote about how his son decided to give up fighting with his brother for Lent. Halfway through he asked how it was going, and his son replied it's going OK, but I sure can't wait for Easter!. Well, the point is it's probably of course something he shouldn't return to. Again we want to emerge from Lent not to find where we hid the candy, but rather a better

person - so what better way to do that than work hard at trying to eliminate nagging sins from our lives.

Another spiritual practice during Lent is almsgiving. Lent gives us a chance to look at how we use our resources, but again think outside the box here. It's important to be generous and to help others, but time is perhaps an even more valuable commodity. Lent is a great time to try to become more generous and spend more time helping those in need, or even with family if we have become too busy or our out and about all the time rather than spending time at home with loved ones.

Lastly, Lent is a great time for prayer. As a priest, I made a promise to pray daily a prayer called the Liturgy of the Hours. You can download an app for that prayer for free on your iPhone too. These are the prayers of the Church and they have readings from the Bible and saints and other spiritual writers along with various psalms and other prayers divided into sections of the day. I bring up my promise to say them because I really am glad the Church asks all clergy to do this prayer, because it would be so easy for me to fall into a habit of missing days or thinking "I'm just too busy" or "well my work is my prayer today." Remember, we have to be Saint Mary and Saint Martha. We have to work and be active, but we also need time to listen to Jesus. So use Lent as a time to find time for spiritual growth and prayer, using what works best for you personally. The Liturgy of the Hours can be a little confusing but the phone app can be helpful in walking you through them (and its free too as I said; the books are about \$100 and I use them mainly as I prefer "old school" actual books). I really like these prayers personally. But there's the rosary, the chaplet of Divine Mercy, Stations of the Cross which we have every Friday evening during Lent, spiritual reading, silence and meditation, reading the Scriptures, etc. There are so many ways to pray so use what works best for you. Just make an effort to pray more, maybe even putting a reminder on your iPhone date book or setting a prayer alarm. And don't give this up come Easter; hopefully you'll find that praying more has brought you closer to God and made you a better person.

I hope you have a wonderful and joyful Lenten Season. Remember, this isn't a season to just get the ashes so people at the office know you went to Mass, or to "one up" people in conversations so they know what you've given up, or to just load up on fish on Fridays at fish fries. It's a season to grow as a person. Who do you want to become? Our end is not ashes. Our end is redemption through what Jesus has done for us. But if God is willing to go so far for us as to suffer and die out of love, how far are we willing to go for Him? Taking up our crosses daily isn't fun, for the way to Easter for us all must lead through Good Friday. But ultimately we must do so to fix our eyes on the crown that never withers and fades, the crown of glory. The journey is at times long but we are never on that road alone - Jesus is with us every step of the way. Let's use this sacred season to look to Him and to see what we need to do to stay on that road that will lead us to His Kingdom.

Have a very blessed Lent!

Fr. Paul