

Ash Wednesday “Lenten Practices”  
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I can’t tell you how many times I have been asked, “Father, why does the Church ask that we fast on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday? Why are we asked to abstain from meat on the Fridays of Lent? Aren’t these practices archaic? Are they not odd? Are they not unhealthy? Doesn’t God just love us the way we are?”

“Doesn’t God just love us the way we are?” When I am asked this particular question, I love seeing people’s expression when I answer with an emphatic, “No! Not always, God does not always love us the way we are”. Yes, God does love us and he loves us always. But, God does not love our sinful behavior. God does not love our addictions to anger, greed, gluttony, lust, pride, covetousness, or envy. God does not always love us the way we are.

And this is a sobering message. It is the message we hear in our scripture readings today. The prophet Joel is not talking to any one person in our first reading. The prophet Joel is talking to his whole nation. The message is God does not love them the way they are. “Even now, says the Lord, return to me with your whole heart, with fasting, and weeping, and mourning; rend your hearts, not your garments and return to the Lord, your God. For gracious and merciful is he, slow to anger, rich in kindness, and relenting in punishment. Perhaps he will again relent and leave behind him a blessing...” The message is God loves us. But God does not always love where we are and what we are doing.

St. Paul implores the Corinthians in our Second Reading, “In Christ’s name: be reconciled with God. For our sakes God made him who did not know sin to be sin, so that in him we might become the very holiness of God. As your fellow workers we beg you not to receive the grace of God in vain.” Wow, that is quite the message isn’t it? St. Paul is telling them that God loves them. Paul is also telling them the God does not love the way they are at present.

And so, every year, the Church gives us the season of Lent. The word Lent is actually from the old English meaning “Spring-time”. It is that time every year we are called to do some spiritual Spring-cleaning, to help clean up those areas in our soul that have need of cleaning or repair. The season encompasses the forty days Jesus fasted in the desert. I say “encompasses” because if you count the days from Ash Wednesday to Easter Sunday, it is actually 46 days. This is because there are 6 Sundays in Lent, and Sunday is always a feast day.

Why does the Church ask that we fast on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday? Why are we asked to abstain from meat on the Fridays of Lent? Why am I to give something up or take something new on during this season? Aren’t these practices archaic? Are they not odd?” To begin with, it may interest some that the Church does not ask us to just fast on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. Fasting and other forms of penance are excellent ways to remind ourselves that, although we are called to be good citizens in the country we live in, we are first of all citizens of the Kingdom of God.

The ashes we will be receiving today are important. They remind us that we are dust and to dust we will return. The ashes and the denial of earthly pleasures remind us that our lives ought to be focused more on things that matter for eternity rather than on things that turn to dust.

“OK Father, why fish?” The practice is actually to abstain from meat on Fridays, if you wish to include fish in that category be my guest. On the other hand, we can consider that the fish was, and continues to be, a symbol for Christ. In Greek the word for fish is Ichthus. Take each letter of that word and you get, Jesus Son of God Savior.

Now, Jesus died for our sins on a Friday. Eating fish then can call to mind Jesus’ sacrifice. Fish on Friday therefore can be quite metaphorical of Eucharist, especially if we include in this practice a measure of fasting. All you can eat lobster misses the point. Why? There is also something to be said about being intentional of what you put in your body from time to time. It is a good spiritual practice because, in our culture, we have a habit of consuming more than we should. This is why the practice of giving something up until Easter, or taking on something new that is personally healthy or good for the community is a good thing to do. This practice and the practice of no meat on Friday however, doesn’t have to be confined to just Lent. I know Catholics who practice this year round.

Of course, our Lent will be in vain however unless two other practices happen in conjunction with our fasting. We must above all else pray. We must pray daily. There are a thousand ways you can pray during the Season of Lent. Take time to pray daily. Our Lenten practices are meaningless without prayer, as is our claim to discipleship. During Lent, we pray more intensely for the grace of repentance and conversion. We examine our consciences more and ask for the forgiveness of our sins more, taking advantage of the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

In addition to fasting and prayer, we must give alms. Lent is a time to turn up the volume on our giving to the poor. We will have Operation Rice bowl again this year that cares for the needs of people in areas of extreme poverty. We also have our St. Vincent de Paul and African orphans to support. These are worthy ministries to support year round, however, during Lent, the practice of giving alms opens my heart in love and compassion to others in need.

Meanwhile, I invite us all to be mindful of the words of our Lord. When we fast, when we pray and when we give charitably, do not make a show of it. On the other hand, we are, as St. Paul says, ambassadors of Christ. What Jesus is saying, it seems to me is, don’t put on a self-righteous show of what you are doing. Let our prayer, fasting and almsgiving come from a generous spirit, not a self-serving spirit. Otherwise, we miss the point.

My friends, we have entered into the forty days of fasting, prayer, and almsgiving. Our practices may seem odd to others. These practices, however, are spiritual exercises for the soul. They not only help us to become better disciples, they help us to become better human beings. They help us remember that we are ambassadors of Christ and therefore countercultural. During Lent we are a sign to the culture in which we live that God still loves us. God loves us. There's the proof (the cross). The cross is proof that God loves you. God's love doesn't stop there however. The cross also calls us to conversion of heart because although Jesus loves us tenderly, he doesn't always love us just the way we are. He calls us to something better. He calls us to discipleship. Every year, on Ash Wednesday, it is good to be reminded that time is running out. It is good to be reminded that we are dust and to dust we shall return.