

Lenten Practices: Assisting Interior Transformation

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The parades have ended in New Orleans – at least until St. Patrick’s Day. The King Cakes have been consumed, and the “Mardi Gras” revelry is over for another year. The Season of Lent, a season of turning away from sin and turning more fervently toward God, is upon us. Lent holds a special place in the hearts of many Catholics. There are Catholics who haven’t gone to Mass in years who wouldn’t think of missing ashes, and they *will* give up *something* for Lent.



The name Lent derives from an Anglo-Saxon word, “lencten,” which means springtime. The Season of Lent also is identified with the Latin word *Quadragesimo*, which means forty days or the fortieth day. It recalls the Scriptural basis for Lent, the forty days that Jesus fasted in the desert after his baptism before beginning his public ministry. It was Jesus’ time of getting prepared for ministry and getting ready to battle and conquer the forces of evil.

Lent wasn’t part of the practice of the early Church in Jerusalem. There was a fast for catechumens preparing for baptism, but not for the wider community. It was only when the persecutions against the Church and the widespread martyrdoms ended in the 4th Century that fasting, as a way of preparing for Easter, became a practice for the faithful.

By the time of the Council of Nicea in 325, Lent had assumed its current length of about 40 days. The actual number of days from Ash Wednesday to Easter Sunday is 46, not 40. Officially Lent ends at the start of the Mass of the Lord’s Supper on Holy Thursday. There are some creative ways for trying to make the number of days between Ash Wednesday and Holy Thursday work out to 40.

Sacrosanctum Concilium (Nos. 109-111), the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, teaches that Lent has a twofold character: (1) preparation for baptism, and (2) disposing the faithful, by prayer, penance and almsgiving, to turn away from sin, devote themselves more faithfully to God, and prepare for the celebration of the Paschal Mystery of Christ’s passion, death and resurrection. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* goes on to say: “It is important to impress on the minds of the faithful not only the social consequences of sin but also the essence of the virtue of penance which leads to the deterioration of sin as an offense against God.”

The tradition of beginning Lent by a marking with ashes in the shape of a cross on the forehead is attributed to St. Gregory the Great and dates to the 6th Century. Scripturally, ashes are a reminder of human sinfulness and human mortality. Thus there is an option for the minister imposing the ashes to say, “Repent, and believe in the gospel” or “Remember you are dust and unto dust you shall return.”

The three great Lenten spiritual practices (designed to facilitate growth in faith and conversion) are Prayer, Fasting and Almsgiving. In today’s gospel, Jesus reminds us that these are not practices we engage in for external show or applause or approval. Rather they are all about assisting interior transformation.



Prayer is the first and foundational spiritual practice of Lent. The expression goes: “Prayer is to the spiritual life as air is to physical life and breath.” Prayer is nothing else but intimate personal union the Most Blessed Trinity. The person who doesn’t spend consistent time in prayer with God will never mature in faith. To repeat: The person who doesn’t spend consistent time in prayer with God will never mature in faith. For me

personally, the commitment I made to daily prayer and daily mass over 25 years ago was the turning point in my life.

For us who are priests and seminarians, Lent is the *premier* time to commit or recommit to prayer: to daily mass (not just being present at mass, but preparing for mass and being prayerful at mass), to the Liturgy of the Hours (praying them prayerfully and for the good of the church) , to spiritual reading (as a springboard to prayer), and to personal prayer time with God (whether it be conversational prayer, meditational prayer on the Scriptures, reflection on the Lord’s Passion or the Stations of the Cross, Eucharistic Adoration, or simply sitting with God in silence). In this 90th Anniversary Year of the founding of Our Lady’s Seminary, Lent is a particularly appropriate time to deepen our devotion to Our Blessed Lady.

For all of us (clergy, religious, seminarians and laity), Lent is the time to stop making excuses for not praying and to make prayer the No. 1 priority in our lives.

Fasting or Penance is the second great spiritual practice of Lent. The Church asks all the faithful to abstain from eating meat on Fridays in Lent (hardly a big deal in the Seafood Capital of the Country) and to fast by eating one main meal on two days of the season, Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, if we are of a certain age and health. Obviously these are minimal sacrifices. The real sacrifice of Lent is to engage in meaningful penitential acts that help facilitate a process of conversion.

Penance, voluntarily denying ourselves a pleasure for some good, is all about making us disciplined people, i.e. disciples. Penance helps us grow in the virtues like prudence, fortitude and temperance, which in turn help us grow in other virtues like patience, humility, gentleness and purity. The theory of penance is this: If I am going to deprive myself voluntarily of something I really enjoy like a scoop of chocolate ice cream, then I will exercise greater discipline in other areas of my life. I will resist the temptation to stay up late and go to bed earlier. I will get up the first time the alarm rings in the morning.



In my priesthood, I have been impressed by the voluntary sacrifices that people offer up in Lent to grow in virtue. People forego desserts, coffee, soft drinks, fast foods, other foods, meals, restaurant visits, alcohol, smoking, TV, Facebook and Internet. They take cold showers and sleep on a hard floor instead of a soft bed. Penitential acts are especially valuable because they can help us break patterns of sin. In his book, “Rediscovering Catholicism,” Matthew Kelly, a popular Catholic author and evangelist, wrote about how fasting changed his life for the good as a young man:

“In my life, I have known the demon of habitual sin. When I turned to God in my late teen years, I was possessed by such a demon. I tried with all my might to wrestle with it, but nothing worked. I prayed and prayed, begging God to free me from this sin, but he didn’t. I employed all the power of my will, but that didn’t work either. Then one day I noticed the passage in Mark’s Gospel (“some demons can only be cast out through prayer and fasting”). At that very moment, I felt the hand of God on my shoulder. Encouraged by a friend, I began to fast each Friday eating only bread and drinking only water. I offered this fasting to God, asking him to liberate me, and that’s precisely what God did. He cast the demon of habitual sin from my life. If you are being tormented by demons of habitual sin, turn to God through prayer and fasting.” (pp. 229-230)

St. Thomas Aquinas wrote that there are three great values to fasting: (1) the repression of one’s concupiscence or strong desires of the flesh; (2) atonement for actual sins; and (3) disposing oneself to higher, more spiritual things. We don’t want to overdo Lenten penitential practices in an unhealthy way, but the importance of fasting and penance cannot be overemphasized as an essential part of the work of conversion.

Almsgiving or Charity is the third great spiritual practice of Lent. Lest our Lenten penance become too self-centered, we are called to go out of ourselves by works of charity. Through the prophet Isaiah, the Lord calls us to “share our bread with the hungry, shelter the oppressed and homeless, clothe the naked, and not turn our back on our own.” (Isaiah 58) St. Ambrose wrote about how there must be a link between Lenten penance and charity, “There must be a connection between fasting and

almsgiving. What you deny yourselves in fasting – you must give to heaven in the poor.” As important as fasting is during Lent, Lent must involve more than giving up something for 40 or 46 days; it must involve acts of charity.



Pope Francis’ Lenten Message this year focuses on the twin themes of poverty and charity. He writes, “Christ, who was rich, became poor so that we might become rich. Christ’s poverty which enriches us is his taking on human flesh and bearing our weaknesses and sins as an expression of God’s infinite mercy to us. Christ makes himself poor in the sacraments, in his word and in his church.” “In imitation of our Master, we Christians are called to confront the material poverty of our brothers and sisters, to touch it, to make it our own and to take practical steps to alleviate it. We also are called to be the Lord’s instruments of charity, mercy and forgiveness to the morally and spiritually poor.”

Once again this Lent our seminary will participate in the Rice Bowl Program of Catholic Relief Services – a program designed to help the materially poor around the world. Collection boxes will be distributed to everyone next Monday. We will have an opportunity to donate to the poor from the funds we are saving by our Lenten penitential practices. Of course, in a big city like New Orleans, there are lots of poor, so there are many chances to take practical steps to address human need (e.g. the needy at various traffic intersections). There also are opportunities to help the poor through the many outreach efforts in the church. Additionally there are occasions to help family members, friends or brother seminarians struggling with moral poverty (sin) and to extend mercy and forgiveness to someone who has hurt us. Almsgiving is an essential part of the Lenten experience.

The Collect for today’s mass sets out the Lenten agenda: “Grant, O Lord, that we may begin with **holy fasting** this **campaign** of Christian service, so that, as we take up **battle** against spiritual evils, we may be **armed with weapons** of self-restraint.” The prayer says we are in a spiritual battle and we are asking to be armed for war. And the Prayer over the Gifts for today’s Mass says: “As we solemnly offer the annual sacrifice for the beginning of Lent, we entreat you, O Lord, that, through works of penance and charity, we may **turn away from harmful pleasures** and, cleansed from our sins, may become **worthy to celebrate devoutly the Passion of your Son.**” These prayers indicate that the Church has great expectations for each of us for the Season of Lent.

Today, through the grace of the Holy Spirit and the intercession of the Blessed Mother, Blessed John XXIII and Blessed John Paul II, may we embark on a meaningful campaign of spiritual practices to repent and be faithful to the gospel. May we be spiritually focused, committed and energized. Grant us, O Lord, a transforming Lent.