

Lent: A Season for Chastened Bodies, Enlivened Hearts, and Renewed Life

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Happy Valentine's Day!

The sentiment, "Be my valentine," no matter how broadly flung or individually focused, speaks about **relationship**, a need for connection, a desire to express love and a longing to be loved. One-on-one, it is the desire for intimate friendship: caring for, worrying about, supporting, and challenging a special someone so that s/he can be the very best and happiest person possible.

There is someone who knows quite a bit about this kind of relationship, taken to the highest level possible, but you probably never think about her. She is the patron of this faith community: Margaret Mary Alacoque. Practically singlehandedly, she reversed a deplorable image of God in popular piety that viewed God as aloof, severe, strict, and judgmental. In a word, barely approachable. Through a series of mystical experiences in prayer, she encountered Jesus, who was infinitely loving, sensitive, compassionate, and wanting people to love him, not fear him. This encounter is depicted in a shrine at the back of your worship area.

Theologians fussed and fretted over the authenticity of these revelations, but eventually accepted them. In my mind, there's a simpler way to believe that these experiences came from God. Margaret Mary belonged to the religious Order of the Visitation [Mary and Elizabeth]. Their motto was, "To be extraordinary by being ordinary." Now what do you think this community of religious women thought of their Sister who admitted that she was having visions of Jesus and insisting that they follow the instructions she received from Jesus? This has to be God's sense of humor. In the midst of strong resistance, negative judgment, and probably jealousy, Margaret Mary persisted and devotion to the Heart of Jesus as we have known it became the popular piety of the day.

Whatever you think of devotion to the Sacred Heart, sometimes expressed with visual excesses and over-the-top sentimentality, it highlights two very important Christian beliefs. Taken literally, the Heart of Jesus is a real, human, heart of flesh. This points to the incarnation: God taking on our human nature and experiencing a body just like we have. Taken symbolically, the Heart of Jesus not only desires to love us intensely [flames], but has given us definite proofs of his love [crown of thorns and cross]. When we say, "Heart of Jesus," or "Sacred Heart," we speak not of a physical organ, but rather of the person of Jesus, divine and very human.

Although Margaret Mary popularized devotion to the Heart of Jesus and gave it a particular expression, this spiritual image goes back to the early Church. Indeed, the foundation for this

devotion is found in John's Gospel account of the crucifixion. Jesus already died of suffocation, but just to make sure, a soldier used a lance to pierce his side, from which blood and water flowed. Contemplation of the Pierced Side of Jesus led believers to consider how great a love Jesus had for us to give his life completely. Since the heart is popularly seen as the source our emotions, it was a short transition from Jesus' pierced side to Jesus' Heart.

And as John's Gospel would have it, nothing is as it seems at first glance. The Pierced Side of Jesus is not primarily an image of death, which the blood symbolizes, but of new life, to which the water points. Jesus has fulfilled his mission and now flow streams of living water that will be a source of life for all who believe. Or as Jesus says earlier in John's Gospel, "When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself" [John 12:32] and "I have come that they may have life and have it in abundance" [John 10:10].

This is what we celebrate at Easter, and in preparation for this Church feast, there was an Easter fast, sometimes lasting 1, 2, or 6 days. Simultaneously, the catechumens, who were preparing themselves for the reception of the sacraments of initiation, that is, Baptism, Eucharist, and Confirmation, undertook a joyful fast of 1-3 days.

In this context, fasting actually sets its eyes on feasting. Something of great importance is about to happen. Business as usual is not desirable. We need to stop, focus, and get ourselves ready to celebrate. There are many ways to do this, including cleaning and decorating, but an effective way is to feel it in our bodies. Because food is such an important feature of celebrations, holding back for a few days enlivens the senses that may have been dulled. In terms of money, we might save now so we can splurge later. In terms of food, we can eat simple meals now so we can enjoy a sumptuous feast at a later date. Put in simpler terms, it's Mom's wisdom, "Don't spoil your appetite before dinner."

A popular theory assumes that the season of Lent developed simply by stretching out these few fast days before Easter into a 40-day period. Probably not that simple. So, we need to pause here and enter into an experience quite foreign to our own. I'm asking you to use your imagination. If you find it helpful, close your eyes as you follow my promptings.

- Imagine yourself in a familiar place. It could be home, your workplace, or a vacation spot. Take a moment to get comfortable there.
- Now, take away all means of transportation other than animals or on foot. This means no cars, no trains, no planes. Wherever you imagine yourself to be, how do you move to another place?
- Now, take away the plumbing. No pipes, no faucets, no flushing toilets. To get water, you need to pull it up out of a well or scoop it up from a stream or river. And, of course, you have to use an out-house. Wherever you imagine yourself to be, how does this reality change how you live?

- Now, take away gas and electricity. No gas-powered engines, or gas stoves. No electric outlets, no electric appliances like a toaster or a refrigerator, no electric lights. Everything operates by hand; your source of light at night is a full moon or candles. Your source of heat is a large fire. When do you go to bed at night and when do you get up in the morning?
- Now, consider where your food comes from during the winter months. There are no grocery stores filled with fruits and vegetables; or canned, packaged, and frozen goods, and no dairy aisle or meat counter. If you have a farm, you might have stored up some grains, to which the mice continually help themselves; probably dried beans, and you might rarely butcher a chicken, goose, or pig. If you are a hunter, you might kill some wild game. If you have to barter for these goods, you may not be able to afford them. In your own cupboard, you might have anything you could have preserved by salt or by drying. If you imagined yourself in a tropical paradise, you're probably good to go. But if you're in Naperville, or somewhere far from the equator, the winter months are lean and possibly dangerous if the previous growing season experienced drought or some other natural calamity. During the winter months, everyone must eat less so everyone can survive until the earth grows warm again and enters another growing season.

In this case, fasting is not a particularly spiritual exercise; it is a survival tactic. Not so long ago in our history, this was a common, human experience that humbled people. They were not in control; they depended upon the providence of God and upon the cooperation of others. Imagine how people welcomed the coming of spring. They weren't focused on spring flowers, but getting a much-needed dose of Vitamin C from the first green sprigs of parsley, lettuce, or the shoots of green onions.

This human experience informed the spiritual practice of fasting, that was not necessarily connected to Lent. The practice often lasted for 40 days. The number, 40, whether days or years, meant a relatively long time. In Scripture, the number 40 is often associated with hardship, as in the flood [Genesis 7:9], the Hebrews wandering in the desert [Exodus 16:35], and the Philistines oppressing Israel [Judges 13:1]. But the number 40 is also associated with preparation to receive divine communication or guidance, as in the fasting of Moses [Exodus 24:18, Deuteronomy 9:9] and of Elijah [Kings 19:8]; or preparation for ministry as in Jesus' testing in the desert [Matthew 4:1-11].

The spiritual practice of fasting, undertaken at any time of the year, pointed to one's ultimate dependence upon God for all forms of sustenance; it facilitated an opening of oneself to the movement of God in one's life; or it expressed profound grief over sin or mourning over the death of a loved one. Undertaking the spiritual practice of fasting naturally opens oneself up to prayer and a positive relationship with one's neighbor.

The early Church used fasting as a means of purification for adulterers and executioners who wished to be readmitted to the Eucharist, for lapsed Christians, and for catechumens who earned their living by “impure occupations” such as wrestling, running, acting, and hairdressing.

The earliest mention of the season of Lent is approximately 300 years after the death of Jesus. The Ecumenical Council of Nicea spoke of “tessarakonta” a Greek word meaning “forty” in imitation of Jesus’ forty days in the desert. The name for Lent in Latin, Italian, Spanish, and French is some form of the word for “forty.” The term, “Lent,” is an Anglo-Saxon word that means, “to lengthen” as in the daylight hours, therefore a word for “spring.”

The Ecumenical Council of Nicea emphasized Lent as a season of forgiveness and harmony in the Christian community, a time of purification which enables people to receive fully God’s gifts. It is at this moment that the practice of fasting is linked to the time preceding Easter. This Council also fixed the date for Easter, which up until that time varied from place to place.

Initially, the rules for fasting and abstinence were quite severe. During the 40 days of Lent, only one meal a day was allowed in the evening. [A modern example is the Moslem practice of Ramadan.] During Lent, Christians did not consume meat, fish, and animal products, such as milk, cheese, and eggs.

The Eastern Churches fasted only on weekdays: Monday through Friday, but the Western Church fasted Monday through Saturday. Sunday was always considered a feast day and not part of Lent. So, in the 600’s, Lent began on Ash Wednesday, to get an exact count of 40 days. At the same time, the ritual use of ashes fixed the season of Lent as one of repentance and forgiveness.

In the 800’s, Christians could have their one meal after 3 PM; by the 1400’s, they could have a main meal at noon, with smaller meals or snacks at other times of the day. Eventually some prohibited foods were allowed, such as fish. Although the Eastern Church practice is still strict, in 1966, the rules for Roman Catholics changed, obliging them to fast only on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, and abstain from meat on Lenten Fridays.

These fasting regulations are the background to the traditions of Mardi Gras and the blessing of Easter baskets on Holy Saturday. Mardi Gras is French for “Fat Tuesday,” the last day before Ash Wednesday to clean out the kitchen of all forbidden foods: meat, butter, eggs, and cheese. This is why *paczki*, or Polish jelly doughnuts are popular on this day. Russians call the days before Lent, “Butter Week.”

Then, on Holy Saturday, foods that were given up during Lent are placed in an Easter basket and blessed, such as, sausage, butter lambs, and decorated Easter eggs.

Since Vatican II, the emphasis of the season of Lent is on supporting catechumens, who are preparing for baptism; a recommitment to the baptismal calling of all Christians; and on penance, with a particular emphasis on the social consequences of sin. Lent is meant to be a joyful, not a somber season.

The Gospel reading on Ash Wednesday sets the well-known practices of Lent: prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. What we often forget, however, is that Jesus suggests these practices be done in private and definitely not for show. These are disciplines, a word that comes from “disciple,” with a root meaning of “to learn.” While there are many ways to understand these three disciplines, I would like to suggest that prayer is learning to be in a relationship with God, fasting is learning to be in a relationship with oneself, and almsgiving is learning to be in a relationship with one’s neighbor.

Each season of the Church year focuses on different aspects of our Christian commitment and practice. The spiritual disciplines of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving are not exclusively Lenten practices; they are life-long practices. The Lenten season helps us focus and take stock of how we’re doing. So, let’s take a look. I’ll do this by pointing out some common misleading ideas, that certainly hold a kernel of truth, but not the whole truth.

Prayer is learning to be in a relationship with God. The first misleading thought is that “more is better.” God is not interested in quantity, but delights in the quality of your relationship. The second misleading thought is that “formal prayer is better.” Mass, Stations of the Cross, Rosary. If, however, you do not bring yourself to these formal prayers, they will remain only beautiful words and empty rituals. Sometimes, I think God yearns to hear you use your own words rather than those of someone else, no matter how eloquent they may be.

Another common misunderstanding is, “in prayer, I should ignore my body.” If you’re an evening person, don’t expect to pray very well in the morning. If you don’t like to sing, don’t attend a sung Evening Prayer. If you have bad knees, don’t insist on kneeling. If you’re carrying a burden, grief, or disappointment, don’t expect to ignore it during prayer. If the cancer keeps you from focusing for more than 30 seconds, don’t expect to meditate for 30 minutes. Accept your body and allow your prayer to express who you are in this moment.

One more common misunderstanding: “prayer is sufficient.” Prayer is a relationship, not a dependency. I often imagine that when God hears the intercessions at Mass, God would like to respond, “I’m glad that you’re interested in these people and these situations. But why are you asking me to do something? Why don’t you do something for them yourselves?”

Teresa of Avila says it best when she defines prayer as “being with the One who loves you more than anyone else does.” When you love someone deeply, you know the experience of being in

that person's presence. Words are nice, but not necessary. It really is that simple, and we trip over ourselves trying to pray.

So, how is my prayer expressing my relationship with God? Or enhancing my relationship with God? Do I need to change anything or try something new?

Fasting is learning to be in a relationship with self. A very attractive, but misleading thought is "fasting is just for Lent." Like other spiritual disciplines, it's beneficial all year long. Especially during Lent, people think "more is better." God does not want us to take on unnecessary burdens, only helpful ones. God appreciates quality over quantity. Does my practice of fasting make me cranky or more loving?

One more misleading thought: "fasting has to do with food." This is only one means of fasting. What good is it to give up chocolate, cigarettes, or eating between meals, if one continues to gossip, be envious, or revengeful? And back in the food category, what is the point to abstain from meat on Fridays only to splurge on lobster?

We've already looked at fasting, in which we give up, do without, endure for some other need or good. It makes an empty space within ourselves so that Christ can fill it with his own presence. In our consumer society, we might fast from luxuries that we convince ourselves are necessities: excessive independence, electronics, clothing, material goods. John of the Cross noted, "God does not fit in an occupied heart."

If the act of fasting is an act of relating to myself, it will change me, however gradually. I grow in humility as I acknowledge my faults, my desire to improve deepens, and my openness to God's guidance expands. So, in terms of the practice of fasting, what am I doing now? What do I need to push out? What do I need to let in? Do I need to change something or try something new?

Almsgiving is learning to be in a relationship with my neighbor. Especially during Lent, a common misleading thought is "more is better." Again, it's the quality of the almsgiving, not necessarily the quantity. You will recall the story Jesus told of the widow who dropped two pennies in the collection basket in the Temple. Jesus revealed that the value of her offering was greater than all the offerings made that day. Another misleading thought: "almsgiving has to do with money." The point is to offer help to someone in need. Share what you have; it might be more valuable than money.

Misleading thought #3: "If I give to one, I'll have to give to all." This thought carries the sense of feeling guilty when you say "no." But this is a big, fat excuse to become paralyzed and do nothing. Mother Theresa said, "If you can't feed a hundred people, then just feed one." Do what you can.

The last misleading thought: “I’ll say no because I can’t tell if this person is worthy.” Worthiness, however, is not the issue; your generosity is. And this echoes God’s generosity to us, whether we are worthy or not.

In Greek, the word for “alms” means “an act of compassion or mercy toward the poor.” This suggests some level of relationship with a neighbor in need. Wisdom from the Book of Sirach admonishes, “A beggar in distress do not reject; avert not your face from the poor. From the needy, turn not your eyes” [Sirach 4:4-5]. How many of us look away from a person begging on the streets?

With the story of the Good Samaritan, Jesus refused to define, “Who is my neighbor?” and instead described what it looks like to act neighborly. Almsgiving is a relationship. And as Jesus relates in the story of the Last Judgment, whatever you do to the least—whether showing compassion or indifference—you do to him.

The corporal and spiritual works of mercy are examples of giving alms, but the needs are great and can never be confined to 14 specific acts of mercy. So, what is the quality of my relationship with my neighbor in need? How can I act neighborly? How can I intensify my compassion? What alms do I give now? And how do I give them? Do I feel called to do more or less at this moment in my life?

When the season of Lent is over, the idea is not to pack up our spiritual disciplines of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving like we would Christmas decorations or winter clothing. When the season of Lent is over, and if we’ve taken stock of ourselves and taken action, then we’ll be stronger in taking up the daily challenges of Christian living, which can be summed up in Jesus’ invitation, “Take up your cross and follow me.”

Our crosses are all about us: within family relationships, within health and financial concerns, within the practice of our faith individually and at St. Margaret Mary Parish, within the desire to pass on our faith and its values to others, especially our children, and within our experiences of a world weighted down with violence, dominance, prejudice, and racism.

If we can take up our cross and embrace it with faith and love like Jesus did, then we are guaranteed to know struggles, suffering, pain, passion, and death or seeming failure. We are also guaranteed God’s love, new life, refreshment, and resurrection.

Every person in this world has a cross to bear—there’s nothing particularly Christian about that. But as Christians we ask, “Why not bear our crosses in the loving and understanding presence of Jesus? It gives purpose to a sometimes crazy world of ours because we always place

ourselves in the presence of the One who loves us more than anyone else does—and in this world, you can't do better than that!

So, what is the purpose of Lent? It is a season of chastened bodies, enlivened hearts, and renewed life. Or put another way, Lent is the season to learn how to be in relationship with oneself, with one's neighbor, and with God. It is the season to "stir into flame the gift of God that you have" [II Timothy 1:6] and be for the world "hearts on fire."

Happy Valentine's Day!

CLOSING BLESSING

May God,
who is constantly drawing us into relationships
inspire us to respond with loving compassion.
AMEN!

May God,
who promises us abundant life,
walk with us through these Lenten days
as we seek
to be chastened, enlivened, and renewed.
AMEN!

May God,
who gives us a spirit
of power, love, and self-discipline,
remind us to stir into flame
the gift of God that we have.
AMEN!