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The Holy Season of Lent

I have always loved the Lenten season, which actually begins on the first Sunday, in which we as a community of believers are called to accompany Jesus into the desert. There we wrestle as Jesus did with those forces of evil which hinder us from full discipleship. The four days before that Sunday, beginning with Ash Wednesday, are like a warm-up before the contest in which we prepare to give our utmost best in order to be one with Christ in his passion, death and resurrection. The word Lent actually comes from the lengthening of days as springtime approaches. We speak of Lent as a holy season, a time of special grace and blessing. What makes Lent exciting, challenging and fruitful is that the whole community commits to spiritual renewal by undergoing a deepening conversion to the way of Jesus.

On Ash Wednesday, each of us is reminded to die to self in order to be reborn into a new hope, a new trust in God and a new love for one another. In the scripture readings for that day, through the prophet Joel, Yahweh summons the people of Israel to return to God with a whole heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning. The fasting that God requires is an interior one of rending our hearts rather than our garments. Ashes are placed on our forehead reminding and challenging us to "repent and believe in the gospel". True repentance is an interior attitude in which we are willing to let go of everything that prevents us from growing into spiritual maturity. We are invited to detach ourselves from certain ways of thinking; ways of speaking and ways of acting that prevent our love for Christ from shining brightly.

Lent offers a beautiful opportunity to discover the mystery of Christ within us. It is a quiet but also demanding time; a time of solitude but also a time of community; a time for listening to the voice within but also a time for paying attention to other people's needs. Lent is a

time of preparation to celebrate the mystery of the death and resurrection of Jesus but also the death and resurrection that constantly takes place within us. Hence, we are not to look upon the death and resurrection of Jesus as a historical event that took place along time ago. It is an ever-present inner event that takes place within us, within our minds and hearts so that we can continually grow to spiritual maturity.

Our church recommends three ways to help us enter into the spirit of Lent, namely: Prayer, Fasting and Almsgiving.

1. **Prayer** is certainly at the heart of Lent. We all lead busy lives. In Lent, we should take time out for ourselves, to retreat ourselves through reflection periods of silence where we let God speak to us rather than doing all the talking ourselves. Spiritual reading can prove very helpful, especially using the daily scripture readings set aside for Mass each day. Where possible we should grow spiritually by participating in the weekday Eucharist in addition to Mass on Sunday. Prayer, both personal and communal, deepens our relationship with Christ. Our communion is not only with the Lord but also with one another.
2. **Fasting** includes various forms of self-denial. Those between the ages of 21 and 65 are called to cut back on food intake. For people like myself, now age 72, fasting has a medical benefit to help us shed those extra pounds which seem harder and harder to lose. Not being filled helps us to be mindful of Christ's suffering as well as being more acutely aware of the millions of people in which hunger is a way of life. Self-denial can include many legitimate pleasures in which we usually indulge whether it is sweets, alcohol, smoking, television etc. Choose one thing that we would hate to give up and be all the better for doing so. For those of us who love fish, Friday abstinence is not so very penitential.
3. **Almsgiving** includes not just giving money but also the giving of our time to those less fortunate, to those in need. Let us make a conscious effort to practice the corporal and spiritual works of mercy whether it be feeding the hungry, visiting the sick and/or the imprisoned, comforting the sorrowful, forgiving injuries, etc. We live in a rather narcissistic age in which self becomes the center of attention. The other receives only a minimum of our time. Perhaps we can consciously begin in the home, the place where people

seem to have little time for each other, especially what we might call quality time. Mealtime should not be the occasion to gulp and scatter but a relaxed time in the presence of another. One of the greatest things we can practice in Lent is taking time to be present with those who live with us, those who work with us, and those whom we encounter each day. Presence is the means whereby we give importance to the other – we say to the other: “you are worth my time.”

Let us journey this holy season. Let us by prayer, fasting and almsgiving be in communion and solidarity with one another and those around us, especially those in need of our attention and love. Let this Lent lead us to a greater sense of God’s mercy and to the Easter joy of resurrection and newness of life.

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