

February 21, 2010

God is good indeed! In the first Preface for Lent, we pray: “Each year you give us this joyful season when we prepare to celebrate the Paschal Mystery with mind and heart renewed. You give us a spirit of loving reverence for you, Our Father, and of willing service to our neighbor.”

The attitude with which we approach Lent is of paramount importance. I must confess that as a young boy, I viewed Lent as a burden and the days and weeks passed so very slowly. On the other hand, the Church views Lent as a joyful season and graced opportunity for us to grow more deeply in our relationship with God and one another. Our Lenten practices should help us reach toward the God who is already reaching out toward us. They should help us extend ourselves with greater patience and consideration to others, especially those in need.

Last year I was undergoing physical therapy after having both knees replaced. My therapist was a Coptic Orthodox Egyptian woman. We engaged in many discussions about Lenten practices. Their Lent is considerably longer than ours and their days of fast and abstinence are numerous and observed very stringently. The therapist was very devout and I was impressed by the spirit of joy with which she, her husband, and children observed the Lenten penitential practices.

This Lent will enable us to grow in our relationship with the Lord and follow His ways of love depending upon the attitude and seriousness with which we undertake the Lenten practices of prayer, fasting, almsgiving, and the corporal and spiritual works of mercy. These practices can help us get in touch with our deepest desires and the fundamental hunger at the very core of our being.

The Church encourages us to set apart more time for quality prayer, both liturgical and devotional. It can be richly rewarding to participate in Holy Mass a couple times during the week to find inspiration from the Word of God proclaimed and nourishment for our day in the Holy Eucharist. Studying the Sacred Scriptures or praying the rosary or Stations of the Cross can also lead us to a more reflective spirit in which we take on the mind and heart of Jesus and grow more deeply aware of His presence within us and within every other person.

Fasting can be a means of a deeper purification of spirit. It may help us become more conscious of the hunger of others and move us to be more generous to the poor and homeless. It is good to deny ourselves of things that we take for granted in order to be more open to saying “yes” to God and to others. Fasting might also help us deal with possible excesses such as too much television watching, alcohol consumption, or other addictions.

The giving of alms deepens our concern for those who are poor and in need. It reminds us that a disciple of Christ necessarily lives a life of self-giving love. A disciple of Jesus lives out of a deep sense of stewardship, generously giving of our time, talent, and treasure with the recognition that all of these are gifts from God to be used for others.

Original sin tempts us to be self-preoccupied, self-focused. Yet, Jesus calls us out of self toward others: “For the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many” (Mk 10:45).

At the Last Supper, Jesus washed the feet of His disciples and said that they were to imitate His example. We do just that when we reach out to others in the Corporal or Spiritual Works of Mercy, for example, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and imprisoned, comforting the sorrowful,

forgiving injuries, bearing wrongs patiently, and praying for the living and the dead.

Lent is, indeed, a special gift from God and a unique opportunity to grow in God's love and in the love of one another. Let us make the most of this season in solidarity with one another and with a genuine sense of joy.