

REDISCOVERING LENT

GENERATIONS OF FAITH

MARCH 13 AND 16, 2011

NO OTHER SEASON OR FEAST THROUGHOUT THE YEAR CALLS FOR DEEPER, MORE HEARTFELT PRAYER THAN THE LENT AND EASTER SEASONS. LENT CALLS US TO PRAY AS JESUS PRAYED IN THE GARDEN OF GETHSEMANE, OFFERING HUMBLE OBEDIENCE TO THE WILL OF THE FATHER.

BACKGROUND READING:

CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH : 638-658, 673-674, 988-1019, AND 2746-2751

U.S. CATHOLIC CATECHISM FOR ADULTS: LENT 173, 192-93, 222, 238, 334 AND 518

REDISCOVERING CATHOLICISM BY MATTHEW KELLY: CHAPTER 16

"Take up [your] cross daily and follow me."

Luke 9:23

LENT CHALLENGES US TO ...

During Lent we seek to grow closer to God, and to turn away from sin into the living arms of our loving God. Lent challenges us to...

- *hear and follow God's call.*
- *take time to pray and seek God's guidance in our lives.*
- *turn more fully to God which includes treating our neighbors with love through acts of justice, compassion, and service.*
- *take time to consider our choices and to look at our relationships for ways to be more loving, more fair, more forgiving and more compassionate.*
- *take time to share God's love through acts of service and justice.*
- *renew our belief in the Easter promise that we share in Jesus' Resurrection.*
- *prepare for renewing our baptismal promises during the Easter liturgies.*

There are three traditional ways we can grow closer to God during Lent – by praying, by serving (traditionally called almsgiving), and by fasting. Prayer, fasting, and almsgiving – like the legs of a tripod – make up the traditional practices of Lent. Praying nourishes our spirits.

Fasting teaches us about sacrifice. And works of service (almsgiving) enlarge our hearts as we serve the needs of others.

NEED FAMILY, GROUP, OR INDIVIDUAL IDEAS FOR LENT?

- 1. No T.V. for a night. Share the evening with the family.*
- 2. Visit someone who is ill.*
- 3. Pray for people who are hopeless and tempted to give up.*
- 4. Cook dinner for a person who lives alone.*
- 5. Invite someone to share your dinner.*
- 6. Pray the rosary.*
- 7. Say "I'm sorry" to someone you've hurt.*
- 8. Discuss the special gifts of your close friends. Send them a note of your appreciation.*
- 9. Make your family meal a party tonight, celebrating your love.*
- 10. Offer to help a senior citizen with some task.*
- 11. Send an Easter card to someone in a nursing home.*
- 12. Bring someone to Mass with you.*
- 13. Celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation.*
- 14. Read a good book on the life of your favorite saint.*
- 15. Give a donation to an organization that feeds the hungry.*
- 16. Write a love note to someone in your family.*
- 17. Read Psalm 100.*
- 18. Go out of your way to be kind to someone you don't like.*
- 19. Take a walk. Take a bag and pick up litter as you go.*
- 20. Clean out your closets. Give clothing to an agency that helps the poor.*
- 21. Sit in a quiet place and pray for ten minutes, thanking and praising God.*
- 22. Be happy. Go without complaining for a whole day.*
- 23. Give up something you like today. Think about how Jesus gave up his life for love of us.*
- 24. Study extra hard in school today.*
- 25. Make a "Lenten space" somewhere in your home. Place in your space a candle, your Bible, a purple ribbon or some other reminder to do something for God and others each day of Lent.*
- 26. As a family, go for a walk through the neighborhood. Talk about how your family can be good neighbors.*
- 27. Have a simple evening meal of soup and sandwiches, with no dessert. Talk about people who don't have enough to eat.*
- 28. Schedule time for family play. Play board games or action games. End the playtime with a prayer for your family always to grow together.*
- 29. Declare one day to be Helping Day. Each person in the family promises to be helpful... all day long. In the evening, compare notes.*

30. Adults, pick one day not to eat till sundown. Use the hungry feelings to remind you of how much need there is for forgiveness in the world. Talk about your day with other family members.
31. Read from the Scriptures for 10 minutes each day of Lent.
32. Come to Mass on the weekdays of Lent.
33. Create a journal to record your experiences during the Lenten seasons: your thoughts, feelings, questions, hopes, dreams, faith practices.
34. Document your Lenten journey by making a Lenten scrapbook. Use photos, artwork, prayers, reflections, works of service, etc.
35. Tell someone "I love you."

Matthew Kelly Discussion Questions

(From Matthew's book *Rediscovering Catholicism*)

Matthew says, "Fasting is a sharp reminder that there are more important things in life than food. Authentic Christian fasting helps to release us from our attachments to the things of this world. It is often these worldly attachments that prevent us from becoming the-best-version-of-ourselves. Fasting also serves as a reminder that everything in this world is passing, thus encouraging us to consider life beyond death." (pg. 227) Questions: How attached are you to the things of this world? How do you view fasting? Could your perception of fasting be improved and what kind of a difference would it make in your spiritual life?

Matthew says, "Encouraged by the example of 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 it was then that God cast the demon of habitual sin from my life. I believe with my whole being that some demons in our lives can only be cast out through "prayer and fasting" ~ Mark 9:29. (pg. 230) Question: If you are suffering under the slavery of ingrained habits, how do you feel about turning to God through prayer and fasting as a means of liberation?

Matthew says, "There is a war taking place within you. It is the constant battle between your body and your soul. At every moment of the day, both are vying for dominance. If you wish to have a rich and abundant experience of life, you must allow your soul to soar. But in order to do that, you must first tame and train the body. You cannot win this war once a week, or once a year, or even once a day. From moment to moment, our desires must be harnessed. Penance, fasting, abstinence, and mortification should be a part of our everyday lives." (pg. 235) Question: What do you think about that?

Matthew says, "It is also important to recognize that not all forms of fasting and mortification involve food. You can fast from judging others, or criticizing, or cursing.

Two powerful forms of mortification that helped me to grow tremendously were the practice of silence and stillness. Sit in the silence for twenty minutes. It isn't easy. That is why so few people pray. After you have become comfortable in the silence, be still for twenty minutes. Completely still. It is difficult. Yet I am convinced that silence and stillness are two of the greatest spiritual tools." (pg. 237) Question: Why are silence and stillness great spiritual tools? Challenge yourself to give it a try.

Matthew says, "We practice penance not because we want to punish ourselves or destroy ourselves, nor is it because the Church wants us to feel guilty or have a poor self-image; but rather, we practice penance as an expression of sorrow and to be restored. We want to be all we can be. We want to be all God created us to be. We want to become the-best-version-of-ourselves." (pg. 238) Question: How can practicing penance help you to be the-best-version-of-yourself?

A LENTEN PRAYER – HOW TO FAST

The season of Lent is more than a time of fasting, but is also a joyous season of feasting. Lent is a time to fast from some and to feast for others. It is a season that offers us the opportunity to practice what we say we believe.

*Fast from judging others feast on Christ indwelling in them.
Fast from emphasis on differences feast on the unity of all life.
Fast from apparent darkness feast on the reality of light.
Fast from words that pollute feast on phrases that purify.
Fast from discontent feast on gratitude.
Fast from anger feast on patience.
Fast from pessimism feast on optimism.
Fast from worry feast on trust.
Fast from complaining feast on appreciation.
Fast from negatives feast on affirmatives.
Fast from unrelenting pressures feast on unceasing prayer.
Fast from hostility feast on nonviolence.
Fast from bitterness feast on forgiveness.
Fast from self-concern feast on compassion for others.
Fast from personal anxiety feast on eternal truth.
Fast from discouragement feast on hope.
Fast from facts that depress feast on truths that uplift.
Fast from lethargy feast on enthusiasm.*

*Fast from suspicion... .. feast on truth.
Fast from thoughts that weaken... .. feast on promises that inspire.
Fast from idle gossip... .. feast on purposeful silence.*

Gentle God, during this season of fasting and feasting, gift us with your presence, so we can be gift to others in carrying out your work. Amen.

Prayer During Lent

The Gospels tell us that Jesus went into the desert to fast and pray for forty days. We strive to do the same during the forty days of Lent. Through our Lenten prayers we seek conversion from our sinful ways and we renew our baptismal promises. Lent should inspire us to engage in all forms of prayer from Sunday Eucharist to private meditation, from family ritual to small group sharing. And our practice of prayer during Lent should empower us to keep us a regular routine of prayer throughout the year. Ask yourself:

- *Is prayer a part of your everyday life?*
- *What sorts of experiences prompt you to pray?*
- *What do you pray about? Or for?*
- *Why is prayer an important part of life?*

Prayer is discipline, reflecting the habits and practices of discipleship.

Consider the four P's of prayer:

*Place. The **Catechism** mentions several places favorable for prayer: we can pray at church, we can pray in a prayer corner at home, we can pray with religious communities in their monasteries, we can pray as pilgrims at shrines. We can create places for prayer in our homes by carving out a space just for ourselves, or to share with others. (CCC, 2691)*

Posture. Choose a prayer posture that works best for you: kneeling, sitting, lying down (but don't be so comfortable that you fall asleep!), using a small prayer stool, and so. Position yourself in such a way that you are comfortable yet remain attentive as you pray.

Prepare. Even though we know prayer is gift from God, we need to make an active decision to engage our whole being in the time of prayer. Some people use a journal to write down what is on their mind as they start their time of prayer. Others use their imagination to place their distractions in their hands, and then raise their hands in offering to God. What will you do to prepare your heart for prayer.

Process. What process will you use to pray? Will you choose a scripture passage? Will you pray contemplatively, quietly repeating the same phrase as you center your mind and heart and sit quietly with the Lord? How will you pray? Everyone has their own path in prayer, and different times in our lives call for different ways to pray.

THE FOUR TYPES OF PRAYER

1. *CONTEMPLATIVE:* encountering God as though he is one of your best friends. Contemplation is the ability to be with God and to know that he is with you at the same time. In meditation, the mind is working and actively seeking to understand something. In contemplation, the mind is at rest, simply drinking in the moment.
2. *PRAISE:* telling God how we stand in awe of who he is, and all that he does for us. Many of our traditional prayers begin with praise using a simple formula such as "Blessed are you Lord God of all creation, your goodness surpasses all other goods..." and the prayer may go on from there.

3. *PETITION: asking God for the things we need and desire. Trusting that he knows what is best for us.*

4. *INTERCESSION: asking on behalf of another, praying for others, or asking others (even saints) to intervene for you. Jesus is the ultimate interceder, pleading with God on our behalf. So too are we called to prayerfully intercede for others. A simple formula for creating an intercessory prayer is: a) name the person or situation for whom you are praying, b) articulate the need of those for whom you are praying, c) articulate the intercession needed for those for whom you are praying, d) end the intercession with, "We pray to the Lord."*

HOW TO HANDLE THINGS YOU DREAD

Imagine how Jesus must have felt in the Garden of Gethsemane. His time in the Garden was filled with trepidation. Jesus said to Peter, James, and John, I am deeply grieved, even to death." How did he respond to this grief? He brought his anxiety to God the Father in prayer. "Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want."

How do you handle something you dread, particularly as the anxiety builds and the tension rises? When you know you must endure something extremely difficult that you simply cannot avoid, what do you do? Let's consider these four steps:

- **Share your burden.** *Find a "safe" place to share your fears and anxieties. Along with talking to a trusted friend, you can always bring them to God in prayer, just as Jesus did.*
- **Surrender to the experience.** *Trust that God carries you in the shadow of his wing. Surrender does not mean giving up. It simply means giving in to the experience.*

- **Resolve to be strong and stay present.** *When the time comes, when your "hour" has arrived, do all you can to stay in the present moment. You cannot get around the dreaded experience, so go all the way through it.*
- **Trust in God's love and providence.** *Without knowing the outcome, all you can do is trust that God will not abandon you no matter how difficult the journey.*

Let's explore these steps further.

Share your burden. *Make a list of those people to whom you can turn when anxiety begins to overwhelm you.*

Reflect on the following questions:

- *Jesus first shared his burden with Peter, James, and John, who were among his closest friends. Is it difficult for you to turn to someone for help, or to simply share your burden? If so, why?*
- *Jesus then took his burden directly to his Father in prayer. When your anticipation of something leads to dread, do you take it to God in prayer? If so, how do you pray at those times?*

Surrender to the experience. *In his agony in the garden, Jesus surrendered to the will of his Father, knowing full well that he must endure the hardest of hardships. When we face the inevitable, it can be a waste of energy to resist. Reflect on the following questions:*

- *In our culture, "surrender" is typically considered a sign of weakness. Do you believe in that line of thinking, or are there times when "surrender" is the best choice? Explain.*
- *When we anticipate hardship, or find ourselves in the midst of it, well-meaning people will often say something to the effect of "Hang in there. You will learn a lot from this experience." How do you feel when you hear words like this? Do you think these words are generally true?*

Resolve to be strong and stay present. *In the midst of hardship and anxiety, the greatest temptation is to "check out" and leave the situation behind, if not physically, then emotionally and mentally. In the Garden of Gethsemane, the disciples could not stay awake. Sleep overcame them. They "numbed" themselves to the impending pain*

and doom. Meanwhile, Jesus stayed awake, and, in prayer he confronted the situation head on. Reflect on the following questions:

- *When confronted with impending "doom" how do you resist the temptation to "check out" and "numb" yourself to the experience?*
- *Do you believe that prayer can give you inner strength to stay present to the situation, even when the situation is particularly dreadful? Have you ever had such an experience?*

Trust in God's love and providence. *It's easy to trust God when all goes well, but can we do so when confronted with a challenge more difficult and more fearful than we have ever before encountered? Reflect on the following questions:*

- *What does the word "providence" mean to you?*
- *How can one grow into the ability to give greater trust to God? Do you think prayer has anything to do with it?*

Let us pray: *Jesus, you showed us the ultimate way to handle fear and anxiety. Help us to remember your agony in the garden the next time we are confronted with a dreadful encounter. Help us to remain confident that you will not abandon us, but rather give us strength to surrender to the experience. With this confidence, we place our complete trust in you. Amen.*