

LENT



When I was a child, I did not like Lent. I went to a Catholic grammar school, so my classmates and I were aware of the Liturgical seasons from an early age. Lent brings up a series of disjointed memories: comparing the dark smudges on our foreheads to see who got the best-looking and biggest cross on Ash Wednesday; getting out of class to go to Confession and the Stations of the Cross; the “Rice Bowl” Lenten offering boxes we were supposed to fill with spare change to feed the hungry; and being asked dozens of times by twenty or thirty different classmates: “What are *you* giving up for Lent?” As a child, I would not ask myself why I did these things. These were the practices of Lent and as a Catholic, I was to adhere to them like my mother and father before me. That was all there was to it.

However, there comes a point in every person’s life when they do ask themselves why they do what they do. My moment for Lent came a few years ago. There was a lot going on in my life, so while I had given something up for Lent and was keeping the regular observance of the sacraments and doing the fasts, abstinences, etc., I felt like the entire season was just passing me by and I was hardly noticing it. I mentioned this to a priest and the first thing he said to me was that “Lent is a time of joy.” Wait. Hold up. Lent is a time of penance, of sacrifice, and waiting. Where does joy play in it? It turns out that when Lent is approached intentionally and its practices have given due meaning in our lives, joy plays into all of it. Joy is in the “give up,” “give to,” and the “be ready to receive” of Lent.

It has taken me longer than I would care to admit, but I finally understand the beauty of giving up something for Lent. There are so many good things in the world. Sometimes, however, we let these good things get in the way of a greater good. Anything that distracts us from our relationship with God (such as excessive screen time), interferes with our health (such as too much ice cream), or otherwise inhibits us from growing into the free, loving people God intended us to be, is ideal to be given up. This does not mean we believe chocolate or social media are bad. We just value the freedom of heart we need to love the Lord and love each other more.

Speaking of loving each other, “giving to” is another important part of Lent. At Mass on Sundays, we call each other “brothers and sisters” and many beautiful hymns express the familial relationship we have with each other. However, we all have some struggle that helps us forget that love during the rest of the week, when traffic is bad, a loved one is sick, or we are asked to do a project with that one person who really rubs us the wrong way. “Giving to” can be small acts of patience, kindness, or generosity. It could be giving thanks to God that we have enough to eat and passing it on by giving food to the hungry. In gratitude for His forgiveness, we may strive to be more merciful to others by speaking a kind word or choosing not to speak about their faults with others. There are so many ways to be good to each other, to express in small steps the great expanse of God’s goodness to us!

The last part I want to mention is “being ready to receive.” I have found that “giving up” and “giving to” has a way of making the heart grow wider of opening some inner door to all the graces God is waiting to pour within. He loves us dearly and His Hands are practically dripping with everything we need for our salvation and that of our brothers and sisters. He wants each one of us to obtain the highest degree of holiness possible, in order to shower us with His Love and have our love and communion with Him for all eternity. He does not ask a single thing of us that is not designed for our good or that of others. It is not wrong to pray for ourselves – we certainly need it too! During Lent, take the time to pray for those graces you need. Be intentional, so that your act of “giving up” can work to free your heart and your “giving to” can open your heart wider, so that you are ready to receive the Lord’s graces. Then you may find that there is a very real joy to Lent, a fruitful waiting like that of a bride-to-be joyfully anticipating her wedding. If this is not always felt, there is no cause for alarm; God knows what is best for you in every given moment, and all your efforts and good intentions are pleasing to Him. May He bless you during this time of Lent and always and may Our Mother Mary be ever at your side.

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Glory and Praise to you Lord Jesus Christ