

2nd SUNDAY OF LENT -- B (March 8, 2009)
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We are well underway with this season of Lent, and so it may be a good time to ask ourselves how we are observing this holy season and what we are doing to try to draw closer to Christ. Of course, we are always encouraged to those three traditional practices of prayer, fasting and almsgiving. Related to that idea of fasting, one of the typical questions we often hear in this season: 'what are you giving up for Lent?' The story is told of a priest who was called to the home of a sick person one cold March evening. As he walked up to the house, a figure stepped out from a building, gun in hand, and said "Give me your money!" The priest opened his overcoat to get to his billfold; the robber saw his Roman collar and said "Oh, excuse me, Father--I didn't know you were a priest". The priest was grateful that he wasn't going to be robbed after all and said "Here, have a cigar." The robber waved his hand and said "No thanks, Father--I gave up smoking for Lent." Next time, he might try giving up robbery....

Fasting--the idea of 'giving up something', especially for Lent--is a time-honored practice. And it is very much connected with one of the Precepts of the Church, those practices that the Church gives us to help us in our lives of holiness and discipleship. One of those precepts is to observe the prescribed days of fasting and abstinence. Lent is the time when this precept has special relevance; every year we print in our parish bulletin (and you can find in many other places as well) what those rules involve. Briefly stated:

--fasting means having only one full meal a day. This obligation pertains to Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, and applies to those Catholics between ages 18 and 59.

--abstinence means not eating meat on Ash Wednesday, the Fridays of Lent and Good Friday. This applies to Catholics ages 14 and up.

These are matters of obligation for us; we should take them seriously. Even so, however, it's rather obvious that these are very minimal obligations. And even these do not oblige if there are serious health or medical reasons that would indicate otherwise. We are very much encouraged to take on voluntarily some other act of self-denial involving something that we enjoy, something we would really notice. E.g. if one decides to observe the Lenten Friday abstinence from meat by having a seven-course lobster dinner at a five-star restaurant, you could legitimately ask if that's the kind of Lenten sacrifice one is called to make...

Why fasting? Why 'give something up for Lent', something that is not evil or immoral in itself (like a certain food we really enjoy)? In his Message for Lent for this year, Pope Benedict has given us an excellent reflection on the practice of fasting and the reasons for it. He reminds us of the very long history of this spiritual practice and discipline--recounting many examples from both the Old and New Testaments of individuals and groups of people who saw fasting as a way to turn away from sin and to redirect themselves to God. The pope also makes the very interesting point that, although fasting seems to have lost its spiritual meaning in our own time, it has become a popular means of fostering one's physical health.

But the spiritual value of this time-honored practice is still very real. For one thing, as the pope says, fasting (which leads to a physical hunger) can make us more open to listen to Christ and be fed by his saving word. Remember Jesus' response to the devil's temptation to turn stone into bread after Jesus' 40-day fast in the desert: "Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God." As Pope Benedict said, "Through fasting and prayer, we allow [Jesus] to come and satisfy the deepest hunger that we experience in the depths of our being: the hunger and thirst for God." If we never deny ourselves, if we are always about fulfilling our own desires, then we can become very demanding and think that's the way it ought to be, that the rest of the world exists to serve me. We can also become lazy and complacent: 'my needs are met, I'm full and comfortable'. Fasting, 'giving up

something', can remind us of the larger truth that there is more to life, more to the world than just having my own demands met. And in our contemporary culture that fosters that self-centeredness in so many ways, that's a lesson we especially need to remember.

Along those same lines, Pope Benedict reminds us that fasting can help us to develop a good and necessary sense of discipline in the moral and spiritual life. In his words: "Freely chosen detachment from the pleasure of food and other material goods helps the disciple of Christian to control the appetites of nature, weakened by original sin, whose negative effects impact the entire human person." If we see no problem in never denying ourselves certain food or drink--thinking we should always be able to indulge our every appetite--then it can become too easy to indulge in other appetites as well:

- indulging in idle gossip or in the refusal to forgive, in the desire to hold that grudge against the person who hurt you (even if that was long, long ago);

- indulging in those sins against the virtue of chastity--whether that means unfaithfulness to one's spouse, going to Internet sites or engaging in other actions or attitudes that degrade the God-given beauty of married love and sexuality;

- or indulging in any other favorite vice, selfishness, or sin (mortal or venial).

In his first letter to Corinthians, St. Paul writes about athletes who discipline themselves in all sorts of ways so as to win their competition. You students and others who are involved in sports of any kind, in music, drama or other such activities--you know that you have to put in a lot of time, energy, and practice to hone your skills...and sometimes you have to deny yourself something you like for the sake of striving toward a larger goal. Think, e.g., about wrestlers who forgo that favorite pizza because they are trying to make weight. It's the same in the spiritual life. If we can say 'no' to something good and enjoyable for the sake of learning self-control, then we are better equipped to say 'no' to sin and selfishness. We need discipline to be a disciple of Jesus Christ (it's no coincidence that those two words--discipline and disciple--are so similar).

Finally, fasting opens our eyes to the hunger and needs of others. As Pope Benedict said, "By freely embracing an act of self-denial for the sake of another, we make a statement that our brother or sister in need is not a stranger." I spoke recently of the poverty in Haiti; many of the people there look like they may receive one small meal a day, if even that. To the degree that fasting leads us to experience a hunger at all (even if only at a minimum level), it can help us to recognize its harsh reality in so many parts of the world and thus prompt us to do what we can to help through almsgiving and other acts of charity.

In the 1st reading, we heard that always-stunning story of Abraham being asked to sacrifice Isaac, his only son. Thankfully his hand was stayed at the last moment. It's so easy to think that God must be an awful tyrant to demand such a thing. But let's remember that this episode was also a preview, a foreshadowing of the fact that God Himself 'gave up' something (or 'someone'), he made the biggest sacrifice ever made--that of his own Son, Jesus, to death on the Cross. St. Paul in our second reading reminds us of 'He who did not spare his own Son but handed him over for us all'. We can and will never, ever be asked or even able to make a sacrifice, a 'giving up' to the degree that God our Father has made in giving up his Son. That was the ultimate, infinite, perfect sacrifice--the 'giving up' of something that can never be surpassed. Our Lenten fasting and giving up (whether or a favorite food or a favorite sin or weakness) will help us, will discipline us to be more attuned to the voice of Jesus and to the voice that spoke from the cloud in the gospel on that mountain of the Transfiguration: "This is my beloved Son. Listen to him."