

Ash Wednesday

Chocolate. The big sacrifice I made each Lent as a kid was giving up chocolate. My parents insisted that all six of us kids do something hard for the season. I still give up desserts for Lent - not just chocolate, but all desserts. And it's still hard to make it through all six weeks. Next year, just to give you fair warning, Ash Wednesday falls on February 14. Valentine's Day. If you plan to give up chocolate next year, you will have a tremendous challenge on day one.

Instead of giving up something, some people do something positive. They exercise more. They pick up trash they see outside. They visit the sick. I have a friend who writes by hand 40 letters every Lent, one a day to 40 different people who have influenced him. Whether you give up something or do something more, Lenten sacrifices are meant to create a clean heart.

Psalm 51, our responsorial today, is one of the bible's greatest prayers of sorrow. When you pray it, you not only confess sin, but you see its consequences. Your sin is premeditated. You commit it because you thought about it, knew the harm it would create, planned it, and carried it out. Your sin is not accidental, but deliberate. When you pray Psalm 51, you say you don't want to live this way. You ask God to clean your heart so you can return to life without sin. You ask for the presence of the Holy Spirit, who will keep you from sinning again. Then you will experience the joy of God's salvation. "O Lord, open my lips," you say, "and my mouth shall proclaim your praise."

We do penance during Lent not just to sacrifice, but to become a better person. With six weeks of discipline, we can form new habits to improve ourselves and the world. We acknowledge our sin, and we pray for the continuous presence of the Holy Spirit to keep us from failing again.

Choose something this Lent: Give up chocolate. Play with your children. Think before you speak. Apologize for something you did. Give away your extra clothing. Give more to charities and less to entertainment. Recycle. Turn off the television. Come to daily mass. Stop wasting food. Pray every day.

But remember, Lent is not just about doing or not doing something. It's about being or not being someone. In Psalm 51 we sang, "Be merciful, O Lord, for we have sinned." God's mercy grants forgiveness; it will also help change our hearts. It will make us better people, but we have to begin by doing penance. What will you do for Lent this year?