

Think back to Ash Wednesday. When you started Lent this year, did you make some resolutions? Did you promise to give up some stuff? Did you resolve to make some changes in your life? Did you set some goals you wanted to achieve before Easter? How is it going? We have two weeks left. It's not too late to reconnect with our Lenten penance and give it one final effort.

Giving up things for Lent is an old Catholic tradition and a good one. The main reason for this practice is to do penance. Just as we receive ashes as a badge of our sorrow when Lent begins, so we continue throughout the season with some activity that tells God, "Look, I know I've messed up some in my life. I'm sorry. Let me do something to show I'm sincere." We naturally do this in our most important relationships. If we've done something wrong, if we've given people reasons to break trust with us, we want to give them reasons to trust us again, so we go out of our way to say we're sorry and to show how sincere we are.

If we don't, we pay for it. A young friend of mine broke up with his girl friend this week. He's depressed, but he brought it on himself. He created a nonexistent online alternative girl friend hoping his real girl friend would become jealous and love him more. When he told her the other girl didn't exist, she didn't believe him. He couldn't figure out why she wasn't relieved that he wasn't cheating on her, he was only lying to her. We learn from our sins.

We give up some things for Lent to show our sorrow, but we may also give up things to show discipline. Lent toughens you up. It's boot camp for Catholics. If you can put up with inconveniences for 6 weeks, you can endure a lot more through the other weeks of the year.

There is another more somber reason why giving up things for Lent is good. It prepares us for death. It reminds us that everything we have is a gift, even our life, and we need to be ready to give it all up whenever our Savior calls us home. Life passes quickly, and a fruitful life is not one that feeds our greed, but one that gives with charity.

After Jesus entered Jerusalem on the first Palm Sunday, he used the world of nature to describe the value of giving up things. "Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit." During Lent we give things up to give more to others, to show the sincerity of our repentance, to strengthen our reliance on God, and to prepare for giving it all up at the end of our days.

Here are some questions for you: Have I shown genuine love to my neighbors? Do I take advantage of them? Do I do unto them what I would not want done unto myself? Have I given scandal? Have I been patient and loving to my family? Have I obeyed and cared for my parents? Have I set a good example for my children? Do I share my possessions with the needy? Have I helped victims of oppression, misfortune or poverty? Have I desired revenge against someone who has harmed me? Would I be ready if I died today? What have I given up this Lent? What effect has it had on me?